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VISION TERRANIA : VOLUME 4 (OF 4)
PERRY RHODAN
NEO
Arndt Ellmer
Hubert Haensel

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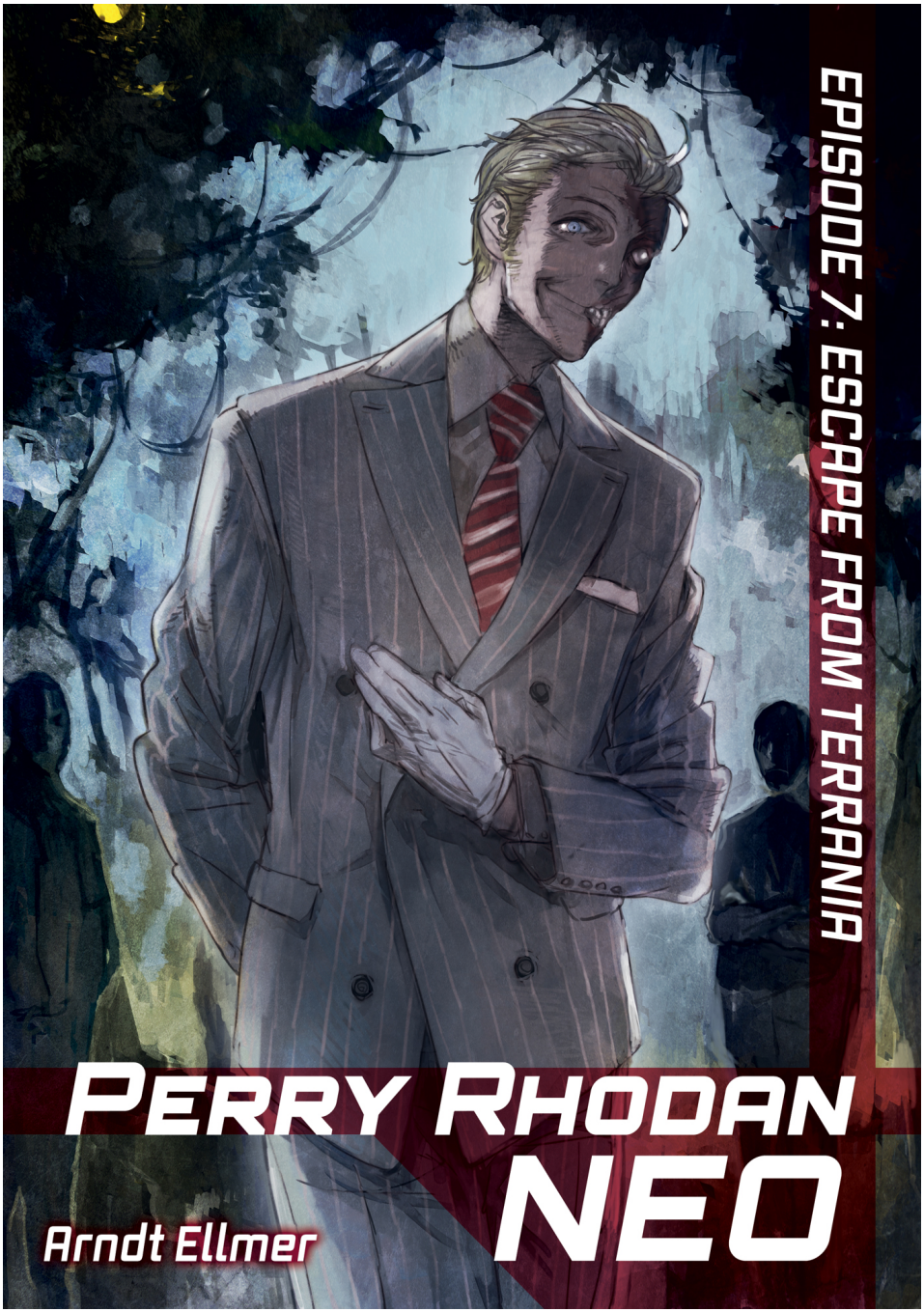
EPISODE 7: ESCAPE FROM TERRANIA
PERRY RHODAN
NEO
Arndt Ellmer

1.

July 11, 2036

They were coming. Tens of thousands of people running for their lives. They had seen the pillar and the mushroom above it, both still expanding, and recognized the threat to their lives from the nuclear explosion. Escaping in a blind panic, they had trampled the tents they'd been camping in. Others had rushed to their cars and started driving at full speed.

Most of them were racing towards the dome that Terrania stood under. There, they hoped to find protection from the deadly radiation. They didn't know that the energy shield was just as deadly—that it would only kill them quicker. Anyone who touched the shield would vaporize in a split second.

The blast wave had already swept over the refugees. Not everyone who had been flung into the sand had gotten up again. Hit worst of all had been the Chinese soldiers running patrols close to the dome. Dozens had died against the shield, vehicles turning to ash and dust along with their occupants.

Perry Rhodan couldn't warn the oncoming mass of people. They were too far away, and he had no way to amplify his voice. He stood on the roof of an apartment building with Bull and heard the people's screams, screams of fear and panic and desperation. Even at this distance, their cries reached his ears.

It sent a chill down his spine.

He hurried to the staircase. "We don't have much time, Reg!"

"Think it through, Perry! What'll happen to our vision?"

"There's nothing to think about."

These people were their followers. Tens of thousands of them. They'd come to Terrania from all corners of the world to be a part of humanity's venture into the stars, just as Rhodan had spoken about in his speech.

Now they were frightened refugees flocking towards the city that was still safe under the dome.

Rhodan was already on the stairs. “We underestimated Bai Jun, Reg!” *Did we really, though?* he asked himself at the same time.

Bai Jun was clever, cunning. He knew every trick in the book and had never given Rhodan time to breathe. However, Rhodan had always had the impression that he could trust the Chinese general’s word.

“Are you sure this is Bai Jun’s doing?” Bull asked, wheezing as he sped down the stairs behind Rhodan.

“Nope!”

On every floor they passed, they saw the inflating mushroom cloud through open doors and windows: a white tower against the pale blue of early dawn.

“Whether it’s Bai Jun, the Chinese secret service, or whoever,” said Rhodan, “it’s a crime against humanity.”

The thought of this atrocity, this inhuman act, haunted him. He fought back the exhaustion that threatened to overwhelm his body. For a few moments, he was almost defeated by the urge to give up, to just sit there on the stairs and let events unfold.

Then his will to keep going prevailed. They couldn’t do much. Just one thing...and it had to be done as quickly as possible.

Rhodan fiddled with his com device and established a connection.

“Nyssen,” came the voice of one of the astronauts.

“We’re coming down,” Rhodan said curtly. “We’re opening the shield!”

Bull lumbered against the stair railing. “Dammit, Perry, what game is Bai Jun trying to play with us?”

“Later!”

They kept hurtling down the stairs. The rotten feeling in Rhodan’s stomach wouldn’t fade. It only grew stronger.

With a single strike and this mushroom cloud, the Chinese military had wiped out everything he and his comrades had achieved: the landing in the Gobi, the founding of an independent territory called Terrania as a symbol of a unified mankind, and also their care of a human-like alien called Crest, who had come to Earth seeking a cure from Terran doctors. In retrospect, the destruction of the *Stardust* during its recent descent to Terrania looked like a portent of doom.

“The bomb,” Bull suddenly gasped. “Why did it explode all the way over there?”

"Where?"

"Behind the hills. Tough to determine exactly, but it looks like about twenty kilometers to me."

Rhodan wasn't sure what reason there could be. Why would they want to expose the victims to serious illness rather than killing them straight away? Who even knew if the energy shield would block the radiation or not?

We're thinking too small, he suddenly realized. *Being too naive.*

They reached the ground. Darya Morozova, the Russian cosmonaut, was waiting for them. Bull had rescued her and three other spacefarers from death by suffocation on the Moon.

"The Chinese are driving tens of thousands of innocent people to their deaths!" she cried, appalled. "And we can't do anything to stop it!"

"We can't just look the other way. To the generator! We have to send out the construction machines! They should make paths that can lead the people into holes in the shield we set up at entrance points."

They ran out into the street. Behind the buildings, the shield flickered. Beyond it lay the desert. Past where the blast wave had hit, the rocky and sandy ground was strewn with debris.

Rod Nyssen, Conrad Deringhouse, and Alexander Baturin came towards them.

"The soldiers are shooting into the air and the sand," Deringhouse called. "They're driving people here, towards the city!"

"Those bastards!" Bull's face turned red. "First they stop giving them any food and water, and now they're hunting them for sport."

Rhodan didn't say a word. He saw through the general's intentions. He saw Bai Jun's behavior over the past few weeks in a different light now. Clearly, he had listened to all of Rhodan's demands because he'd known about the plan brewing in the background. The atom bomb was mankind's ultimate weapon. There was no countermeasure.

It wouldn't be long before the first refugees reached the shield.

That would explain why the bomb was dropped so far away, thought Rhodan. *The general doesn't want the world to see him as a mass murderer.* His tactics had achieved exactly what he and the Chinese government had wanted.

Rhodan ran. Not far beyond the shield, he saw the refugees. They were approaching the city in a broad wave. A wave of bodies

was surging towards Terrania and its deadly border.

He could picture what would happen in approximately one minute. The crowd would reach the shield. Those at the back would keep pushing forward, shoving the ones in front into the shield, relentlessly, row by row. Only when the mountain of dead was high enough that they couldn't move forward any farther would it finally stop. But the ones farther back would keep pushing. The ones in the middle would be crushed.

Thousands, tens of thousands of deaths. He felt dizzy. Had Bai Jun been gambling on this? If the city were surrounded with piles of lifeless bodies, it would be a declaration of moral bankruptcy for Terrania, the independent city, the symbol for a better future for mankind.

And for him, the one whose words had enticed all these people here.

What for? thought Rhodan. *Just so we could hold on to the possibility of reaching for the stars? That can't have been it. We can't be a power that's only legitimized on the backs of countless dead.*

Breathless, he reached the generator. He could hear screams from thousands of throats, see fights breaking out among runners who felt they were being held back by those next to them. He saw people fall and disappear under the others' shoes.

Vehicles carved their way through the bodies, steamrolling living obstacles, getting stuck, and then rolling onward again.

Rhodan also saw uniforms amid the turmoil, and weapons.

"We can't let the soldiers in here," Bull groaned, out of breath and leaning against the generator.

Rhodan silently shook his head. He agreed, but they'd have no chance of separating their followers from the enemy.

The construction machines were trying in vain to bring some order to the desperate onslaught outside of the shield.

"We'll never achieve unity on this planet if it's founded on murder," Rhodan said quietly. Then he started communicating with the generator computer. "Open up the shield between the ground and a height of three meters. Now!"

The flickering at ground height disappeared. Seconds later, the surge of escapees reached the shield.

"Checkmate!" said Bull.

Tiny insects appeared on the horizon and rapidly grew larger.

Soon they revealed themselves to be camera drones—flat power gliders with long antennae. Their destination was Terrania, of course.

"They'll break their noses against the shield," Nyssen remarked. "Serves them right."

"Don't be so sure of that," said Rhodan. "Take a look at the soldiers back there! They're rallying. They can't see us yet, since we're hidden behind this shipping container."

"You're right!" Bull slammed a hand against his head. "They're not just looking for us. They're after the shield generator too."

Rhodan suspected that the high-tech device was actually their first priority. The astronauts' fates probably didn't matter at all to most of the country's politicians. One of those generators would be enough to provide any army on Earth with a new means to suppress all others.

The mass of people reached the group of soldiers and literally overran them. Aghast, Rhodan saw the refugees panicking and yelling their way to Terrania, stumbling as they ran.

However, the construction machines he had sent out beyond the shield had achieved some measure of success: everyone's attention was drawn to the obstacles, the buildings, and the streets. The wave divided into smaller streams, rapidly reducing the risk of individuals being trampled to death.

The first arrivals staggered into the building entrances, seeking shelter within. The buildings were mere empty shells that had been erected by the autonomous Arkonide construction machines and robots in recent days; they had neither electricity nor running water. However, the walls and roofs offered shade and a place to rest.

More people surged closer. Rhodan glimpsed contorted faces. A crying man with two children in his arms. A woman bleeding from her temple with her hair hanging down in clumps. A man who stared in Rhodan's direction, his expression wild; snot dribbled over his lips, and he didn't even notice. His eyes bulged out of his head in fear. He was clutching his left arm, which hung lifelessly.

In that moment, Perry Rhodan wished he had never delivered that speech. Worse still, for a brief moment he wished he had never even been born. He suppressed the urge to flee from the crowd that was about to surge past him.

He hastily spoke into the com device and called over a building

machine with a truck cargo bed. “We’ll have to hide the generator.”

“Perry, that’s crazy! Don’t do it!” Bull exclaimed. Against the thunderous roar that now filled the air in Terrania, Rhodan could hardly even make out his friend’s voice.

“If the generator gets into China’s hands, it poses a threat to all of humanity,” he replied, speaking quickly. “Or America’s hands, or Great Russia’s, or anyone else’s. If it weren’t too dangerous, I’d destroy it.”

“You’re forgetting about the radiation!”

“No, Reg!”

Rhodan pointed to the mushroom cloud. The white pillar and the flat, umbrella-like mushroom cap did look similar to a conventional mushroom cloud, true, but the nearly flawless white color was wrong. A typical nuclear bomb with a fission reactor created fallout that colored the mushroom at the same time it was formed.

“Now that you mention it...” came the quiet response.

“A fusion bomb,” said Rhodan, half to himself. “They produce less radiation, and they build up more quickly than nuclear fission too. Now we also know why it was set off at this distance.”

“That makes sense. China has been putting exorbitant sums of money into armaments over the last few decades. That includes the development of newer, ‘cleaner’ bombs. Bai Jun’s primary goal is to cause panic.”

“We have to assume that this panic has led to hundreds of deaths. The Chinese accounted for that, but not for the mass murder of tens of thousands. Their primary goals were to make us open up the shield, then to capture the generator.”

The refugees kept coming as the wave swept past Rhodan and his comrades. They could really have used more robots in the city. The machines could have taken care of the people. Now none of that was possible.

Camera drones from news networks circled above the buildings. Rhodan instinctively drew his head in. The media would never let a sensation pass them by, just as they hadn’t when the alien Crest had landed on Earth. International cooperation worked just as well here as it did in the political and intelligence spheres.

“Don’t look up,” he murmured. “The folks watching on screens at broadcasting centers are trying to find us even before the soldiers do.”

“The shield, Perry! You have to close the shield again.”

Rhodan nodded. With the sheer mass of the crowds, they might be able to keep the few dozen soldiers in the city under control, but they couldn’t win against a whole army. He was about to give the order to the generator when the words caught in his throat.

“Dammit,” Bull swore.

Rhodan saw it too. The soldiers were spreading out into a pattern some of the officers had evidently formed on the spot. They positioned themselves in the city, right on its borders and on the surrounding land. Wherever Rhodan placed the shield now, whether far outside of Terrania or right in its core, he’d have to clear the soldiers out of the way first—or kill quite a few of them by activating the wall of energy.

There were already enough dead bodies outside that he and his companions weren’t directly responsible for. However, the blood of *these* people would stain his hands. The footage of a ring of corpses surrounding the city would reach every single corner of the globe.

“Do any of you have a better idea?” he asked.

He received no answer. The small group of six astronauts and cosmonauts huddled more tightly around the generator between the containers. The tide of bodies was surging past them in a wave of dust and naked fear.

Rhodan took the decision away from his companions. “Disable the shield entirely!”

The dome over Terrania disappeared altogether. This triumph, at least, he did not begrudge Bai Jun or the string-pullers behind him.

Now it was sealed, this moral and political end of the future. The soldiers’ boots were stamping it into the ground while the west wind gradually tore the white pillar in the east into fragments, drifting away.

“Help me find tarpaulins and sacks!” said Rhodan.

They provisionally covered the generator with empty building material holders, and then they plunged into the throng. Chaos had already broken out at the entrances to buildings. Everyone wanted to get in; a lot of people were pushing and shoving. Nudges and bumps were growing into fistfights.

“Keep moving!” Rhodan called to a group he categorized as American or European. “There’s enough space for everyone. The city has more than enough buildings.”

The crying man with the children in his arms appeared and almost ran him down. “Have you seen my wife?” His accent sounded British.

Rhodan shook his head. “Come on, I’ll carry one of your kids for you!”

“Get away from me!” the man screamed. Now the kids, too, started to cry.

Rhodan kept going, making himself inconspicuous and going with the flow. A bulky shadow fell over the street; it belonged to a remote-controlled drone. Hundreds or thousands of kilometers away, journalists, and undoubtedly secret agents too, could see what was happening in Terrania.

Somewhere in the direction of the center, a shot was fired. For a few moments, the whip-like *bang* overrode the hellish noise that blanketed the city. The people held their breaths, horrified.

The first soldier to lose his nerve, Rhodan thought. *He won’t be the last.*

Bai Jun had had the upper hand all along. The general had given him a lot of time, but eventually his patience had run out.

Rhodan managed to vault over a high balustrade and make his way to the next building’s basement stairs. In the stairwell, he found gray plastic sheets that were a few meters long and close to two meters wide. They came from Chinese army stocks; an Arkonide robot had stolen these and other materials in a nighttime foray. The tarpaulins were shredded in places, but they were good enough for his needs. He hastily folded them up, clambered over the balustrade again, and carried away the six to eight kilos of plastic.

There were refugees everywhere, many of whom looked like they came from China and other East Asian countries. Then he saw a group of men and women with dark skin who were speaking English to one another.

“Everything’s fine,” he called. “Stay calm!”

It didn’t look like anyone heard him.

He hurried on, sweating with the effort but with no other choice. A lot was at stake for humanity. It would be unthinkable for the Arkonide technology to fall into any one major power’s hands.

Don’t you see? These achievements will only bring peace if they belong to all mankind, not to one single group.

When he’d spoken to humanity, it had listened to him and

understood. And now?

"Where's the damn spacecraft?" he heard a voice roar. "I want to get into that ship and leave this place in the dust!"

Were these the peaceful pioneers who wanted to venture forth into space? Surely not.

Rhodan had to stand and wait until the flow of people abated slightly. He didn't look at the time, but the way back took him at least thrice as long as getting there.

He got to the generator just as Baturin was just saying, "A perfect solution would be to shoot ourselves and let nature take its course."

The construction machine arrived. With all their strength put together and the machine's crane to help, the astronauts loaded the generator onto the bed, then covered it with plastic sheets and containers.

"Where are we sending it?" Bull asked.

Rhodan considered. "The basement of building thirty-four." During the siege, the astronauts and cosmonauts rescued from the Moon had begun to number the empty buildings. It had given them something to do, at least for a few hours. They had counted 168, all of them still empty shells. "That one still has a few shafts and chambers that aren't complete yet."

Darya Morozova jerked backwards, bumping against Rhodan, who was following closely behind her.

"Civilians in dark suits," she hissed. "Suits from the same cheap tailor!"

She explained that people dressed like that were trying not to stand out when they mixed in with the larger population. However, when they gathered together in one place, their uniforms stood out all the more. She pointed to a group of Asian men standing nearby between some buildings; they didn't look panicked like the refugees, but were rather having a peaceful discussion. They all wore suits of the same material with the same ties and shoes, even the same shirts. Their sunglasses were identical as well.

"Retreat!" Rhodan said quietly. "The machine can keep going. We'll wait and go one by one."

Like all the equipment Thora had reluctantly left them with, the machine operated autonomously as long as it had been given orders.

Thora. For a single moment, Rhodan thought about the Arkonide commander. She had been proud, even arrogant—and she had let Crest go with the barbarians, firmly convinced that he was doomed to die. Now she was dead, wiped out in the explosion that had destroyed the *Aetron* on the Moon.

One of the besuited men entered Rhodan's field of view. He didn't look at Rhodan; instead, he walked away from the containers that served to hide the astronauts. Rhodan couldn't have said if the man had noticed them or not. When he turned back, the dark suit was gone.

The flow of people was still coming. By now, groups were reaching the city who had been some distance away, fairly close to the bomb. Rhodan saw men and women hauling children and the elderly with them. Some were half senseless with exertion and fear, and with hunger and thirst. Others jostled and pushed to get a spot in one or another of the buildings as quickly as possible. Behind them, the stream was slowly petering out.

He mixed in with them, letting himself be carried in the same direction the construction machine was rolling. In the next side street, he saw a group of soldiers with weapons at the ready. It was clear that there were separate search parties: civilians he judged to be intelligence operatives and soldiers obeying the general's orders. Maybe they were competing to see who would capture Rhodan and Bull first.

There was plenty of cause to arrest the astronauts. Treason, unauthorized invasion of foreign territory, annexing another nation's land, violation of international law. In the Chinese legal system, these crimes presumably earned the death penalty.

Rhodan considered which was the lesser evil. Would he rather fall into the secret service's hands or the military's?

The most perverse part was that the United States government led by President Drummond would make no effort to obtain their pardon or release. Now that it was clear that there really had been an alien ship on the Moon, there was no longer any value to Rhodan and his companions—no truth to press out of them. By now, no intelligence agents would care one bit about the fate of a few misguided deserters in the Gobi Desert.

He spotted the shadow of another drone very close by. The shadow changed shape as if a hatch were opening in the miniature aircraft's torso.

Rhodan heard a buzzing noise. A second shadow emerged from the first, egg-shaped with a rotor at the top. Many of the people nearby saw the shadow as well and picked up the pace.

A man screamed somewhere, shrill and frantic. Two children suddenly appeared before Perry. He knew their faces; he took hold of them and held them closely under his arms.

The egg with the rotor came past. It was a gyrocopter equipped with several cameras. It flew along over the people's heads at a height of a few meters. A second drone swooped down, close on its tail. Rhodan heard the rattling of a machine gun and saw the glow of a muzzle flash. The gyrocopter exploded.

Evidently, Bai Jun wanted the world to learn about Terrania's downfall—but not about the murky details of what was inevitably happening among the onslaught of civilians.

Rhodan looked away. "We're almost there," he said to the children. "Then a new life will begin."

The pair, a girl and boy, quieted a little. Rhodan looked around for their father. He found him at the next corner, a pile of misery on the floor, a broken man. When Rhodan spoke to him, the man didn't understand at all at first. He just stared at his children as if they were strangers.

"You're overwhelmed. Can I help you?"

His reaction was similar to their first encounter. The man spat at him, grabbed the children, and ran away.

Bull appeared next to Rhodan. "He's lost his mind," he said quietly. "It's like they're all deaf. They hear you, but they don't understand you. Maybe it's because of the blast wave from the bomb."

They reached the back of building thirty-four. Nyssen and Deringhouse were just using the machine's crane to unload the generator and lower it into the basement via the stairwell. Together, they slid the generator far into the building, then filled the room with building waste and packing materials.

"The guys in suits have started handing out flyers with your faces on them," said Darya. "They're hunting for you specifically."

"They have to catch us first." Bull raised his fist and shook it in the direction of the staircase. "We still have the two-seater bird."

Rhodan nodded. "But like you say, it'll only carry two. That's not enough. We can't set up a back-and-forth relay to get us all out."

He wanted to keep the *Phoenix* in its hiding place until a true emergency arose.

"Then let's just go into the bunker and fill up the entrance with sand," Bull suggested.

Rhodan shook his head. They wouldn't be self-sufficient in the bunker; they didn't have the supplies and there was no air conditioning. Nor were there any weapons there to defend themselves with. At some point, they'd have to crawl out again.

"We'll go out among the people," he said, "and aim to get as far from the shield generator as possible. We'll make sure to steer clear of the enemy too. Who knows how many people there are out there. It should be enough to keep us covered."

They started moving. A dozen soldiers were approaching the level of building thirty-four and surrounding the adjacent buildings; the arrival of the construction machine hadn't gone as unnoticed as they'd hoped.

Everyone went in different directions, using cell phones to keep in touch.

"I'm on the third street north right now," said Bull before too long. "Just turning onto the second side street east."

"There are soldiers on the fourth street north," Rod Nyssen warned. "You'll collide with them at the end of the alley. Now they're separating and turning into the third streets west and east."

Deringhouse reported from the sixth street north and Baturin from the third street west. He turned onto the fifth north to get out of the way of the soldiers.

Darya Morozova went in between, holding position not far from building thirty-four. "You should get moving. The search teams are getting reinforcements. It's no secret by now that the general's itching to see you two. You should get out of here."

"Reg?"

"We can. But I'll be in a bad mood if I have to leave the others behind."

"We'll create a few distractions to keep them far away from the bird's hiding place," said Baturin. "We'll also make sure that other people arouse the soldiers' suspicions. Deringhouse will provide the rear guard. Morozova will stay where she is. In five minutes, you should all come to the hangar. Over!"

Perry Rhodan suppressed an expletive. This was it. They were finally admitting defeat.

2.

July 11, 2036

The bomb exploded. They couldn't hear it yet, but they could see it. Pale light permeated the tent wall as if the material were not even there. Then the rumbling followed. It wasn't quite as choppy as thunder; it sounded more like large stones rolling evenly across hard ground.

Then it was completely silent again without warning. Not a sound came from outside. It was exactly this quiet in the eye of a hurricane, no doubt.

"John! John!" the girl called.

General Bai Jun stood next to the tent entrance, motionless. His gaze wasn't directed outwards, but rather rested on the visitors. One of them, the skinny boy called Sid, had disappeared a few moments earlier. He'd been trying to get rid of the bomb, to carry it away from the tunnel leading to the energy dome and far out into the desert, where it would cause only minimal harm.

He had succeeded. Partially, at least. Otherwise the explosion would have killed every single life-form that had gathered around the *Stardust*'s landing site.

The moment of silence, where time seemed to stand still, ended just as abruptly as it had begun. A strong wind rose up. The blast wave raced towards them, hitting the tent that sat exposed on the hills and dragging it away. For now, Bai Jun made no attempt to stay standing. He slammed flat against the ground and clawed at a few tufts of dry grass.

An instant later, they were all outside. The general's uniform insignia fluttered like tiny streamers. The air blazed. His face blazed. The sand was like sandpaper on his skin. He could have believed that shreds of skin were already peeling off him.

The man named John Marshall was standing upright again. He pressed his hands against his temples. The girl called Sue screamed and whimpered. The sight of it was painful to Bai Jun. The girl, a

cripple with only one hand, had snuck into his tent to warn him about his adjutant. In doing so, she had put her life on the line. Bai Jun respected her courage.

The woman called Anne Sloane drew the girl close and wrapped protective arms around her.

With some effort, the general pulled himself up as Marshall sank to his knees. “Mr. Marshall, can I help you?” Bai Jun asked.

Now the mind reader screamed as well. Bai Jun didn’t understand all the fragments of words, but he gathered that the man was being bombarded by the thoughts and emotions of tens of thousands of people. He twisted and turned as if under torture, stretching out his hands spread eagle as if this could hold back the flood.

Marshall fell to the floor and doubled over. Anne Sloane appeared to be torn between him and the girl on the floor.

Sue was lying in the sand. Her body was jerking back and forth like a caterpillar trying to escape a bird’s sharp beak.

“I’ll help you!” Bai Jun said to Marshall. “Give me your hand!”

John Marshall didn’t hear him.

The general stared eastwards again at the pillar stretching up into the sky. It didn’t make him think of a mushroom cloud at all, but more like a geyser spurting a fountain of hot water into the air. At the foot of the hill, people were running towards the *Stardust*’s landing site. It was the focal point for all their longing, the place where they hoped to find protection.

But the blazing shield stood in the way. Bai Jun could see the corpses of soldiers who had been flung into the energy field by the blast wave. They were half carbonized, and beside them lay the smoking remains of their equipment, partly melted into formless clumps. Tremendous power was at work down there. No wonder the shield had withstood every bombardment.

Now the people were running straight for it, hoping to find rescue. They were coming ever closer. While Anne Sloane saw to both Sue and Marshall at the same time, Bai Jun transmitted orders to his officers.

“Let the people through and infiltrate their shelter in the city.” His second set of daily orders.

He looked out at Terrania. Where was Perry Rhodan? Had he noticed what was happening on his doorstep? Or had he already allowed himself to be brought to safety by a mutant like Sid?

Construction machines were making aisles for the people to run along. At the ends of these paths, the shield opened up to allow entry into the city, at first only partially, then entirely. Seconds later, the horde reached the thin line the shield had left in the ground.

Hundreds of soldiers ran through; they were crossing that line in the sand as well. Officers divided the men into small groups scattered between the buildings and on the surrounding land.

"I didn't misjudge you!"

Bai Jun rested his right hand on his forehead and bowed slightly in the direction of the young city. He had judged Rhodan correctly. The American was a man who would never sacrifice people's lives for any vision or idea.

The general sank deep into thought for a moment. His trust in the government and the intelligence agencies was deeply shaken. He wondered what could possibly be worth subjecting tens of thousands of people, and the entire surrounding area, to radiation from an atom bomb.

The ends didn't always justify the means. Bai Jun had been taught that as a mere child, and he'd learned it all over again during officer training. "Just because you want to safely cross the street doesn't mean you shoot the drivers in their cars." That had been one of the most striking examples given by his former teacher, Hui Jiang Chung. "Not when there's another option."

Rhodan's giving up, the general said to himself. *For the sake of humanity, he's giving up on his vision.*

And now he had the order to not let this man escape under any circumstance and to transfer him to Beijing. He might as well shoot Rhodan on the spot; he'd spare him some suffering that way.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a figure running across the hill range.

He Jian-Dong! His adjutant. The man he had trusted like no other and practically treated like his own son. Now this nefarious traitor was trying to make himself scarce.

"Hold tight!" said Bai Jun to Marshall. "I'll be right back!"

With burning hot rage in his stomach, he gave chase.

"Hold it!" he called to He Jian-Dong.

His adjutant pretended not to have heard.

The general grew louder. "You'll never see the Tiananmen again if you don't take responsibility for your actions, you traitor to

the will of an entire people!"

That finally helped. The man stopped and turned to him. Bai Jun wondered what his adjutant would do. He wasn't armed; his weapon was already in the general's belt.

"You'll hang for what you've done. I can guarantee that."

The adjutant gave no indication of what he was thinking. He let the general approach.

"You'll face a court-martial," said Bai Jun, "and receive a suitable judgment."

"I followed my orders. I have nothing to blame myself for."

"You abused my trust. That's bad enough. The fact that you yourself were deceived makes the parchment of your glorious deeds fade."

He Jian-Dong emitted a cry of rage and threw himself at the general. Bai Jun had expected that his words would eventually rile up the younger man so much that he lost control. His adjutant had been impulsive and overly ambitious for as long as he had known him.

The general blocked the attack with a strike against Jian-Dong's forearms.

"Did you think you could take over my rank someday?"

The adjutant kicked, but the general dodged to the side and grabbed his leg. With one quick motion, the traitor was lying in the sand.

"You don't have the caliber of a high-ranking officer," Bai Jun continued. "Tie up your loose ends. You'll be disposed of because you know too much. That's the fate of people like you."

He could have killed the man with a single kick of his boot, but that was the farthest thing from his intentions. He drew back and allowed the other to leap up. The younger man's face contorted, no doubt thinking he could gain an advantage from the general's weakness.

Bai Jun turned his back to him for a brief moment. But He Jian-Dong still wasn't ready to pounce yet. Crouched low, he circled the general.

Bai Jun stuck to his approach. "Be careful. You might be possessed by a witch. If so, I don't know how I'll get you down from the mountain again."

Quick as a flash, the general bent down to pick up two small rocks, which he held in his cupped hands. While Jian-Dong

continued to circle him like a predator, Bai Jun threw the rocks at him. One hit his head, the other his throat. The adjutant still didn't react.

Bai Jun turned to leave. "I have more important things to do."

The attack came then. Bai Jun heard the traitor's breath. He dodged, lightning fast, and the other man's body scraped past him. The general seized Jian-Dong's foot and turned it slightly to the side. If he'd wanted to, he could have broken his leg and decided the battle then and there. Instead, he waited for the adjutant to stand up and ready another strike.

"I've gone easy on you until now!" cried Bai Jun. "Whatever happens next, you only have yourself to blame."

He Jian-Dong attacked. He feinted a punch with his right arm but then kicked with his right leg. Bai Jun blocked and grabbed his assailant's wrist, briefly but painfully. When Jian-Dong realized that he wouldn't achieve his goal that way, he threw himself forward and entwined his arms around the general.

"That's more like it," Bai Jun hissed. "Who was your combat trainer? A frog?"

He kicked both of the younger man's legs away and threw himself forward at the same time. Since the adjutant's legs had no purchase anymore, they both gave way, and he had to release his bear hug to break his fall. Bai Jun went to the ground next to him, grabbed him by the throat, and pounded a fist against his temple.

He Jian-Dong's body went limp. The general waited a few moments to assure himself that the traitorous adjutant was still breathing. He Jian-Dong didn't deserve death. He had to live and experience his guilt.

Bai Jun stood, straightened his uniform, and switched on his com device. Then he gave more commands. A jeep came and picked up the unconscious man.

"Take him to the infirmary and make sure he doesn't leave until I order it."

They took the adjutant with them as the general returned to the place where his tent had stood minutes earlier.

"John! Do something, quickly! Rhodan's being overrun!"

There was an urgency to the girl's voice. Her words made Marshall's body twitch as if he were being electrocuted.

Bai Jun saw that the older man was still lying on the ground.

He was moving but looked half senseless. Anne Sloane pulled a cloth out of her pocket, looked around searchingly, and spotted a plastic bottle with water in it. She wet the cloth and laid it on Marshall's forehead.

"Relax," she said. "Try to ignore the voices in your head, John. If they harm you, it could be very bad. Breathe evenly. Yes, just like that."

Then the girl's voice sounded again. "John! Help Rhodan!"

The voice drove the foreigner to stand up. He lurched to his feet, staggering and trying to keep his balance with his arms. Anne held him up.

Bai Jun looked at the mind reader's face. It was contorted into an ugly grimace. Only the whites were visible in his eyes. This man urgently needed a doctor.

"John!" Anne cried pleadingly.

Marshall gurgled, trying to answer her. She stroked his hand, which seemed to calm him. His breath began to even out; his eyes looked normal again. He still groaned, though, and pressed his palms to his temples.

"Come with me!" said Bai Jun. "I'll help you!"

"Perry needs help!" Sue shouted. "Not John!"

Saliva dribbled from the corners of Marshall's mouth. He was visibly overwhelmed by what he was going through. To the general, it looked like he was losing his mind.

"Come on, Marshall! I'll take you to our doctors. I'll take care of Perry Rhodan alongside the little one." Then he internally scolded himself for using the wrong terms. Sue was an adolescent, not a small child. "My apologies, Sue!"

Marshall suddenly jumped at him. Bai Jun was so shocked that he didn't even fight back. The telepath put his hands around the general's throat and began to choke him.

"Stop that!" the general grunted. "You'll...be...shot!"

Marshall couldn't hear him. Bai Jun shifted his shoulders forward slightly, then bent his arms firmly and tried to shove them between his throat and the man's arms.

Sue had noticed that something wasn't right. "John, no!" She grabbed the mind reader's belt and pulled at it, while Anne Sloane tried to put her arms around his chest and pull him away. "Let go, John!"

Marshall didn't listen to her. His mind was clearly addled, as

Bai Jun had feared. The man squeezed even harder, his hands like a vise around the general's throat. Bai Jun could hardly breathe anymore. A strange haze fell over his vision.

With his last breath, he wheezed, "Trust in me! Read my thoughts!"

Whether Marshall heard him and did so, he couldn't be sure. The pressure on his throat disappeared, however. Marshall released his grip and pulled his hands away with a jerk.

"God, what have I done?" he groaned.

Bai Jun rubbed his neck. His larynx hurt when he swallowed.

Marshall turned to Sue. "We can trust him. Let him handle it. He knows what to do."

Bai Jun saw several all-terrain vehicles racing up the hillside at full speed. The soldiers were aiming at Marshall and his companions with automatic rifles.

The general kept them at bay. "Everything's fine. They are helping us."

He ordered ten motorized companies to be assembled to occupy the city in addition to the soldiers who had already formed the bulwark against the defensive shield. A few intelligence agents were among the soldiers. He couldn't avoid that, but he could depend on most of the members being his own troops. In the next few days and weeks, that would be the decisive factor.

One way or another, history would be written here in the near future. How it would look and in what direction it would go, Bai Jun couldn't say yet. If he had his way, it would reflect a vision and a speech that had made a deep impression on him.

Rhodan's speech.

He was almost ashamed of himself.

All of a sudden, Sue cried out, "We forgot about Sid! He should have been back by now!"

Bai Jun didn't waste time thinking. He switched on his com device and requested a helicopter.

"The pilot knows what to do," said the general. "He'll fly you around until you've found your Sid."

The young man called Sid possessed an incredible ability. He could transport people and objects to other places in the blink of an eye. It was thanks to him that Terrania and all these people still existed. Bai Jun fervently hoped there had been enough time left for the boy to get himself safely away from the explosion.

“Come with me, Mr. Marshall and Ms. Sloane!” said the general. “I need you!”

3.

"The coast is clear!"

Rhodan was unceremoniously manhandled by Bull, who shoved him down the ramp.

"On my command, slide the covering away!" he called over his shoulder to the Arkonide robots.

A warning signal came from three of the robots. "Several groups of soldiers and civilians are on your trail."

"Distance?" Rhodan asked.

"Some are two blocks away, others three. They appear indecisive about which direction they should search in."

"Your primary duty is to protect the other astronauts."

"Understood! Your order will be executed!"

There was nothing more Rhodan could do for his companions. Not now, and not from this position.

Bull switched on a battery-powered lamp that he'd attached to the wall with rope and hooks. There it was, the hobbyist tinkerer's masterwork, a hybrid of Arkonide and Terran technology.

"Our phoenix, Perry. Risen from the ashes!"

A homemade phoenix courtesy of Reginald Bull himself. It resembled a flounder with spider legs and measured about twelve meters across. It lacked any outer paneling. The six legs straddled outwards from the middle and bent down at a right angle after a few meters. In the middle, there were two seats, where the Arkonide battledresses were sitting. Bull dragged them down and threw one of them at Rhodan. The suits were no longer functional except for the com units, but the helmets could still be sealed. That would at least protect the wearers from the airstream.

The craft's propulsion unit was housed between the legs. That part was Arkonide tech; Crest had had it built into the *Stardust*. It had proven itself phenomenally resilient; the autonomously operational spacedrive had survived the *Stardust*'s total destruction.

Bull had picked it up out of the burning wreckage and built the *Phoenix* around its components. For their purposes he'd attached

four adjustable jet cones. Their vehicle would ride on their jets of flame. Bull had improvised the steering electronics using looted Chinese parts, while the control stick itself came from the *Stardust*.

"Mach 6," said Bull. "That's how fast this baby can go, in theory. Better if we don't test that. Over here, Perry! We both have to get in at the same time so it doesn't fall over."

Rhodan got in position and waited for Bull to give the signal. They simultaneously climbed up the frame from the left and right, clambered inwards to the seats, and carefully lowered themselves into them.

"Perfect!" boomed Bull. "Now the ignition just has to work. The rest'll go from there. Darya, remove the covering!"

Light suddenly shone from above their heads, and sand that they had used to camouflage the sheets trickled down. It took some effort to pull the large pieces all the way to the side, fully exposing the pit.

"Done!" came a wheezing voice from above.

"Appreciate it!"

A sizzling sound followed, then a hissing. The propulsion unit came online. Hot jets of gas shot from the four cones, each of which rumbled at a different volume.

"Crap, crap, crap!"

Rhodan looked at Bull, who was hurriedly working on the thrust regulators. When the four cones' noise levels sounded roughly even, he slowly turned them to face downward.

The *Phoenix* jerked and vibrated. As it lost contact with the ground, it wobbled alarmingly. Rhodan held on tightly to the armrests of his Arkonide chair. He was expecting the contraption to crash and burn at any moment, forcing him to jump out to save himself.

Slowly, it rose higher into the air. People started to draw near, attracted by the noise. When they saw the giant spider rising out of the hole, some of them turned tail and ran. Shrill screams rang out over the thundering of the conical nozzles.

The soldiers are going to hear this too, thought Rhodan. *We only have a few seconds here.*

The *Phoenix* started listing to one side.

"You're the counterweight!" Rhodan heard Bull shout. "The outrigger!"

Rhodan knew this expression from sailing and from carriage

rides too. He sat up tall in his seat and clung to the pipe frame that held the thing together and also functioned as a roll cage. The spider was sinking down to the left. He adjusted his position in the chair, held on tightly to the pipes, and leaned hard to the right.

The *Phoenix*'s flight angle stabilized, and the vehicle gained altitude. It hung two to three meters off the ground, stirring up unbelievable amounts of dust. Behind the dust, Rhodan caught a fleeting glance of Darya Morozova.

Five meters. Reginald Bull increased the thrust and slowly turned the jet cones downward. The *Phoenix* rose higher and gradually picked up speed. Bull again adjusted the right-hand cones' positions, turned the vehicle slightly, and steered due west.

Somewhere to their left, the *tacka-tacka-tack* of machine gun fire rang out.

Rhodan shouted, "Pedal to the metal, Bull!"

The spider took a leap upwards, swaying wildly. He couldn't shake the feeling that it was about to toss them out. With grim determination, he held on tightly to the poles with his arms and legs. Bull accelerated more strongly. The forward motion stabilized the vehicle. With its nose tilted slightly downward, it shot out into the desert.

Rhodan repeatedly heard the *pling, pling* of shots grazing the spider's frame or legs. Not a single bullet hit the torso or propulsion unit.

"Those Chinese soldiers are pretty bad shots today!" shouted Bull over the noise. "Kind of weird, if you ask me!"

Suddenly, Rhodan's own voice was playing through his helmet's speaker. He heard the words he had spoken to humanity a few weeks earlier. He had emboldened the people to overcome their own fears and take on new challenges. The gateway to the stars was open. He wanted to follow this path together with a unified mankind that was ready to seize its chance. For that reason, he had relinquished his citizenship after his return from the Moon. Terrania was to be the symbol—the foundation for a united human race.

At this moment, it didn't look like his vision for the future would endure for much longer. Some Chinese people from a pro-government broadcaster were close to destroying it. They were the ones playing back his speech and supplementing it with sardonic and derogatory comments.

Their goal was to dismantle the astronaut Perry Rhodan.

I have a dream!

When would people like General Bai Jun and President Drummond realize that their actions were squandering mankind's future? Humanity would get a chance like this once, and only once. That meant recognizing the sign of the times and *acting* on it.

"Reg, can we shut that off?"

Through the helmet visor, Rhodan saw Bull's helpless expression. "Nope."

"Can you determine the source of the radio waves?"

The redhead busied himself with the radio antenna. The twenty centimeter parabola turned left and right, up and down.

"East-southeast," he growled after a while. "The broadcast station is in the middle of the desert."

Bai Jun had troops there. Maybe a propaganda unit was hard at work.

The *pling, pling, pling* continued. The metallic sound made Bull visibly nervous. He changed course, sweeping around to the southwest as short-range missiles came up behind him—half a dozen of them.

"I wish we had the shield generator!" he cried. "But it would have been too heavy. Hold on tight, Perry! They're firing missiles—and the evasive maneuvers could be just as deadly!"

Together they watched the thin, dark shots following a ballistic path up into the sky. It would only take one to blow the *Phoenix* to smithereens along with him, Bull, and everything else in a fifty-meter range.

"Jump out! I'll put this thing down in the sand on my own."

"No can do, Reg!"

Rhodan stayed where he was. He turned slightly to the side and tilted his head. They were coming. Like a swarm of voracious birds, they plunged towards the spider. Rhodan stretched out his arm and watched closely. The missiles' course went past them to the side.

"Impact roughly a hundred meters to port," he said.

Now Bull saw it too. The missiles stayed their course, which took them straight into the sand. Moments later, they struck and exploded. Tons of sand was flung high into the air, which then plunged back down and covered the graveyard of exploding metal.

"That Bai Jun guy sure has bad gunmen." A pause. "Crap!"

A form shot past, gliding horizontally over the dunes. It was a projectile the length of an arm with three tail fins to stabilize its

course. Bull reduced thrust on the left-hand side. The *Phoenix* dropped suddenly, moving downward at a dangerous pitch.

The projectile raced past a distance of maybe a dozen meters from the vehicle. Half a kilometer away, it bored itself into a dune.

Rhodan hastily turned outward and restored the balance the spider had had before Bull unbalanced it. Behind them, all was silent now. The soldiers had ceased firing. Their craft was no longer in visible range.

"Look!" said Rhodan, pointing to the north. They cast a last shared gaze back at the modest skyline that was slowly sinking below the horizon. "Farewell, Terrania!"

"We'll be back," Bull said with a firm voice. "They can bet their bottom dollar on that! But first we've got to get the hell out. What course do you propose?"

"Northward? Mongolia's not far away."

"Sure, but we'll be recognized as foreigners straight away and taken into custody in less than an hour."

"That applies to all the neighboring countries," Rhodan objected. "We're in the middle of Asia, and we're clearly not Asians." A thought occurred to him. "That's it, Reg! Australia! We'd have a better chance of blending in there."

"That's a heck of a lot farther away. I don't know if the *Phoenix*'ll hold out that long." Bull spent a moment considering. "But you're right. It's our only real option. Let's do this!"

The pilot managed to stabilize the improvised aircraft's flight angle, positioning it better against the wind. They flew south-southeast at a maximum height of twenty meters in order to remain invisible to the Chinese military's ground radar.

South-southeast. That was their way to freedom. Flying southeast would have gotten them to the open ocean and international waters more quickly, but that would have meant crossing the greater Beijing area.

Bull continually glanced upward. "Where the hell are they?" he asked after a while. "Chinese interceptors should have started coming for us a while ago."

Rhodan didn't respond right away, but after another half hour, he felt his silent assumption was confirmed. "No interceptors are coming, Reg!"

"Impossible!"

"They don't have orders to. They don't know anything about

our escape."

Rhodan could see from his old friend's face that he didn't understand.

"No, Perry! You're wrong for sure. They know exactly where we are. We just can't see them."

Bull gave the vehicle more thrust and tried to bring the skeletal spider as close as possible to the speed of sound. At six hundred kilometers per hour, the *Phoenix* shook and rattled. Despite their seat belts, the two men almost flew out of their chairs. Bull ultimately opted for four hundred while they were flying over the mainland.

It was still ridiculously fast.

After nearly six hours, they reached the open sea between Macau and Hainan Island and followed the 115th meridian due south.

Rhodan smirked at his friend through the helmet. "Believe me now?"

"No, but I can't explain it either."

"The great Reginald Bull, stumped?"

"You stop that!"

"Either way, it looks good. Chinese air defense only needs to send out one single interceptor to shoot us down. Finished, done, problem solved. No Rhodan left to put ideas in people's heads. Then the secret service would just have to take Crest down in the same way. Down into an early grave."

"Good luck is a thing, you know."

"Sure, but today's not our lucky day."

A few minutes later, they were over international waters.

Later, when land was no longer in view behind them, Bull said, "At least in Australia, no one'll be expecting us."

"Hopefully."

"I have to be honest, I pictured a united human race a little differently, Perry."

"Huh? Are you saying it's united already?"

"Yeah. Against us."

The two fugitives rumbled along about twenty meters above the water's surface. The wind grew stronger the farther out over the sea they got. It pulled at the frame, which resisted as best it could. They'd have made faster progress with a smooth and stable outer

surface—the roughly cobbled together vehicle gave a lot of air resistance. How long it would withstand the wind's tugging, Rhodan couldn't say. Every strong gust made the frame squeak.

A particularly forceful blast threw the spider off course. It teetered, turned around its vertical axis, and flew eastwards. Bull cursed loudly as he struggled to keep the vehicle level. The jet cones' steering motors howled as he swung them sixty degrees downward. The *Phoenix* was now practically motionless in midair.

Rhodan watched his friend course-correct with the help of the compass and slowly return to horizontal flight. Bull repeatedly bent his body out of the cockpit and tried to see something between the frame's pipes.

"What are you looking for, Reg?"

"That cracking. Do you hear it?" The pilot twisted his face. "The materials have been exposed to huge strain. I hope they hold out."

His skin had flushed bright red, as it often did when things weren't going his way. He gestured towards the west, where dark clouds were forming on the horizon.

"We'll never manage it before the bad weather reaches us," he said.

"Manage what?"

"Getting all the way across the South China Sea. Everything's conspired against us. Again. This day from hell just won't end."

Rhodan gazed at the sky as well, but for a different reason. His secret fear still hadn't come true. Not a single military jet appeared; only a few airliners flew far above them at a height of ten thousand meters. They didn't see a single ship. It was like they and their ramshackle craft didn't even exist.

What if that's essentially true? he considered. *What if we're just thin air to the neighboring countries?*

There was only one scenario in which it seemed plausible to him for not only the Chinese army but those of other countries as well to be looking in the wrong direction. Rhodan snapped his gloved fingers. *Bai Jun!* The information about their escape had to have come from the general.

"You look like you've just found the philosopher's stone," Bull remarked.

"Forget it." It was totally nonsensical. Bai Jun had set off a nuclear bomb to force him and his fellow astronauts into

submission by making them disable the shield. Why would he suddenly let them go free?

There had to be another factor they weren't aware of. But what could it be? The whole world was against them. The few people who shared their vision had flocked to the Gobi.

The next gust of wind seized the *Phoenix*. This time, Bull reacted faster and gave more thrust to both left-side cones. The vehicle drifted a little ways to the side but kept flying in a southerly direction.

By now, the entire western half of the sky had darkened. The dividing line between the black clouds and the azure of the eastern hemisphere looked like it had been cut by a knife. As an experienced pilot, Rhodan recognized this as the sign of a weather divide with an extreme pressure difference. Crossing that border would mean facing the kinds of forces that formed into hurricanes and tornadoes.

"What do you think, Perry? Will we make it?"

"We have half an hour left at most. Better to keep a lookout for a good place to land. Fly a little higher too, so the first high waves don't hit us."

The ocean was almost motionless below them, a gleaming blue carpet in the east, a dark gray abyss in the west. The dividing line was sliding ever closer.

Bull brought them up to a height of fifty meters above sea level. "Switch on the live channel seeker," he said. "There's always some stream or other with news and weather reports."

Rhodan pressed the lone button present under the small screen in the inner wall. The screen turned bright. At the same time, a crackling sound played through Rhodan's helmet receiver. He heard fuzzy voices, then the image appeared.

"That must be a station on one of the islands," said Bull. "We're getting close to the Indonesian archipelago, and we'll be flying over Borneo in maybe half an hour." Beyond that, the endless expanse of the Pacific awaited them.

A speaker read out news in accented English. "The United States of America has accused the alien called Crest of murder. Eric Manoli and Clark G. Flipper, both former members of NASA, are being treated as traitors and brought before a court-martial. This is also the plan for Perry Rhodan and Reginald Bull, the two deserters for whom a worldwide manhunt is currently underway."

“Crest! He’s alive!” cried Bull. “And he looked healthy! Eric must have managed to get him to Dr. Haggard!”

Rhodan was silent for a moment. “Yes, he’s alive. But for how long?”

Bull’s eyes widened. “You think they’re really going to kill him?”

“Of course. Crest is a symbol. He’s living proof that the world isn’t the way most people have imagined it. If he dies, everything goes back to how it was before, right?”

“That’s crazy!”

“Yep. And follows a certain compelling logic. Not least because the accusation is valid: the Arkonides *do* have the Moon base crews on their conscience.”

“Sure! But killing Crest won’t bring them back to life. And I say that as someone who had friends up there! Without Crest, it’s…it’s…”

“All over,” Rhodan finished.

They both fell silent for a time, lost in their thoughts. “I know where we went wrong,” said Bull at last. “Humanity isn’t ready to be united and venture out into space. We haven’t earned it yet.”

“That applies to the politicians for sure,” Rhodan replied after a while. “But humanity as a whole?” He looked at Bull with a penetrating gaze. “It’s more ready than ever!”

The next gust arrived and sent the vehicle careering wildly. The once-even sea started to ripple, the first waves’ peaks rolling nearer. Rhodan estimated their height at two to three meters, but they were growing rapidly.

By now, the sun was no longer visible, and it was getting quite dark. This made Bull grind his teeth. He pushed the thrust regulators for the four jet cones slightly upwards. The *Phoenix* fought so hard against the oncoming storm that its frame bent slightly in the nose area.

“You have to take over lookout duty, Perry!” said Bull. “Keeping hold of the damn stick is enough work on its own.”

The side rudders squeaked and clattered like cheap tin. If the steel wires tore, the vehicle would lose a huge amount of its maneuverability. They’d hardly be able to keep it in the air.

Rhodan peered through the front. The water’s surface had lost its last light; the cloud banks were casting bizarre shadows across the ocean. In several places, he thought he’d seen an island, but

when they flew over the area two minutes later, he realized he'd been mistaken.

"How far left to Borneo?" Bull coughed hard. "I can't keep this thing together much longer."

"Fifty kilometers, maybe twenty. No idea."

The horizon in front of them finally turned black. Visibility shrank to a few hundred meters. The storm rattled the frame even more strongly. Bull accelerated so hard that everything around them roared and shuddered.

"There's something below us to the left," said Rhodan loudly.

"Could be. I don't see a thing."

He knew there were thousands of islands in these waters, some small and some even smaller. "Descend here. I can make out something bright on the water."

Bull flew in a leftward curve. At almost the same moment, the heavens opened. What fell were not mere raindrops. It was more like someone had overturned a huge bucket high above them. Violent masses of water plunged down, striking the craft like solid objects. Rhodan's suit boomed like a bell. Stars danced before his eyes. He frantically clung to the seat.

All he heard from Bull were tense breaths. The *Phoenix* twisted to the left, going into a tailspin.

"Crap! A sinkhole!" Bull said. "I have to avoid it."

The jet cones on the right-hand side flared up. The vehicle plummeted; a new deluge of water hit them square on and pushed them downward. Rhodan saw the sea five or six meters below him at most.

Worst day ever, he thought.

Again there were shadows, and again he saw something bright. It was moving towards the vehicle, or the vehicle towards it. He couldn't say, exactly; it was happening too quickly for his weary eyes.

A jolt ran through the frame, followed by a sixfold *crunch*. The spider tilted to the side, then it was still.

"The eagle has landed," said Bull, repeating the historic words spoken by Neil Armstrong, among others. "Don't ask me how I managed it."

His right arm appeared before Rhodan's face, waving a plastic bag. "We need to cover up all the control elements and the seats! Quick!"

Two minutes later, they were sitting under the *Phoenix* on sharp-edged coral, moving as little as possible to avoid causing any more damage to the reef than they already had with their aircraft. They held on tightly to the frame and waited for the apocalypse to arrive.

Waves rolled forward, surged up over the reef, and buried the two men beneath them.

Bad weather at sea was either short and painless or something lasting for weeks and months. In the latter category was the monsoon that blessed South Asia every year. Thankfully, this storm belonged to the former.

It was over in an hour. The small island's coral reefs needed another half hour to even out the buildup of fresh water, which flowed over the reef and out into the sea from small fountains and several spring-like openings.

The two men made their way to safety at the highest point of the reef. Rhodan looked his friend up and down.

"A drenched poodle would look better."

"My boots are watertight, Perry. The suit too. That's the good news. The bad news is that despite covering them up, we have too much liquid in the electronics."

"Then we wait for them to dry. That's better than having to disembark in the middle of the ocean."

The last clouds withdrew, and the sun shone through the water vapor. Within two hours, the water had mostly evaporated, and the sky took on its usual azure color again. The sun also warmed up the two friends on the reef, who were dry but chilled to the bone.

Bull climbed up onto the *Phoenix* and pulled off the plastic bags. Rhodan spread them out on the ground, turning them over after a while.

"The metal's warming up quickly," he heard Bull say. "If you think you're seeing smoke rising up, it's steam. Condensation formed in the control mounting, and that's now evaporating."

Rhodan reflected on what a comfortable ride the astronauts had after the first Moon landing. An entirely flight-ready landing craft, a highly stable and flight-safe capsule, and three parachutes for a soft landing in the Pacific.

In comparison, this journey had been more like that of Daedalus and Icarus. The former had constructed incredible wings

for them, but the latter had gotten too close to the sun and plummeted to his doom.

The two friends sat silently next to each other for two hours. Every once in a while they threw small pieces of the reef that had been broken off by their body weight into the water.

Then it was time to launch. The jet cones fired up, the heat burning black holes into the coral. The *Phoenix* rose up, wobbling into the sky, and setting out on its course again.

Soon after, Borneo came into sight. They crossed the equator, then Bali, and finally flew out over the Indian Ocean, following the 115th meridian due south like an arrow.

Bull flew on into the night. Shortly before midnight, Rhodan took over the controls. The moon shone brightly over a silvery surface that never seemed to end. Roughly a thousand kilometers stretched before them.

Rhodan ascended to two hundred meters to minimize the air resistance. That allowed him to fly a little faster, which meant they would reach their destination before noon. They rocketed over Barrow Island with its many termite mounds, then—at a southern latitude of twenty-one degrees and thirty minutes—they reached the edge of the Australian mainland.

Bull took over the controls again.

4.

July 11, 2036

"John appears unable to verify your statements right now, General," said Anne Sloane. "Please explain in detail what you have in mind."

Bai Jun nodded curtly and confided in the three visitors about part of his plan. He couldn't simply go and declare a revolution against the authorities in Beijing; that would have led to a devastating and counterproductive civil war. He also didn't know which strings the secret service was pulling behind the backs of the politicians and military officers. He Jian-Dong was the best example of that.

For Rhodan and the other astronauts it would be more dangerous still on that front. That meant the general suddenly found himself pressed for time. He had to bring the astronauts under his control before someone else did it. Rhodan and Bull had to get out of the line of fire as quickly as possible; otherwise they had no chance of surviving the next few days.

John Marshall looked at him uncertainly. "You really think..."

"The Americans have the greatest interest in him being dead. It doesn't matter either way to the other world governments, and intelligence agencies from one country will gladly do another a favor when it serves their interests. This makes your task clear, Mr. Marshall. Find Rhodan and Bull before the others do."

Bai Jun noticed Marshall and Sloane exchanging an intense glance.

"I'm with you, General," Marshall said.

The foreigners waited for his order. Bai Jun assigned some capable officers who hadn't yet forgotten how to think independently and gave them their instructions. To start with, they were to capture the astronauts. He wanted to have them in his tent, which by now had been erected again. Then he could decide where to take them next.

The com device produced a variety of signal noises; these were the encrypted replies from the officers he'd assigned regarding position and approach. Bai Jun knew all the codes by heart and didn't need a cipher key. He nodded once everything was clear to him, then took hold of the device again and summoned the paramedic units.

"All of you, go directly to the terrain around where the dome used to be!" he ordered. "There are hundreds of dead and badly injured people there. Retrieve them, secure the area, and help them as much as possible."

Then the mutants and the general set out. Escorted by a dozen soldiers, they descended from the hilltop and approached the city. Just above the rooftops flew several armed drones. By now they had shot down all the media drones, one after another with an impressive hit rate, and were ensuring that no new observers came close. Bai Jun wanted to put his plans into action undisturbed.

They reached the buildings. Bai Jun divided his soldiers into the streets to the left and right. The Rhodan supporters who had fled there from their tent cities avoided the soldiers as much as they could. Men and women peered down at the group from the open windows of the freshly built structures.

"The man over there in the khaki shirt and gray pants with expensive-looking shoes is watching us," Anne Sloane said in a low voice.

"Cantonese, and you don't see many of those in this region," the general replied just as understatedly.

They kept going. The man followed them. Bai Jun would have given a lot to learn the stranger's thoughts, but John Marshall didn't respond when he asked about it.

The general mused, "He's probably searching for the astronauts and thinks we can lead him to them. This proves the secret service doesn't trust me anymore. I can hardly blame them. Anyway, all he needs to do to cause a problem is put his ID card in front of our faces. Could I ask you a favor, Ms. Sloane?"

"Certainly."

"Would you be so kind as to take care of his ID?"

"I can try."

Anne Sloane worked inconspicuously, managing to rummage around in the man's pocket without him noticing. After a brief search, she made the ID card float telekinetically out of his pocket

and disappear into the sand.

"Done!" she said dryly.

Bai Jun sent five soldiers over to the man. They questioned him forcefully; he couldn't prove his identity, didn't understand why he of all people was being apprehended, and two minutes later found himself handcuffed in an all-terrain vehicle.

"Let's keep going!" The general made sure that his foreign companions were always surrounded by soldiers. That created the impression that they were captives.

Along the way, he received further reports. Tens of thousands of people who had been camped outside the dome were now exploring the city of their dreams. For most of them, the reality was sobering. Terrania had turned out to be no more than an empty shell. Some of them made no secret of their disappointment; the first murmurings of discontent were growing loud. Paying close attention, Bai Jun noticed that they were not directed at Rhodan or the other astronauts, but against the Chinese government and soldiers. After all, they were the ones who had recently refused to provide food and drinking water.

This had been Bai Jun's idea, and it had been the right choice at the time. However, the situation was different now.

"Instructions to all emergency personnel," he said into the com device. "Reassure the people; lend an ear for their concerns. Where possible, provide them with water. We'll try to arrange for proper relief as soon as we have an overview of the situation."

Shortly after the next turnoff, he realized that wouldn't be easy. A group of adults blocked the way in front of him and his group. They were women and men of various nations, around half of them Chinese. Within seconds, a scuffle broke out.

"Back! Immediately!" Bai Jun ordered his soldiers.

The scuffle cleared up. Soldiers and civilians stood across from each other in the dust of the improvised street. The civilians didn't move out of the way.

"This is our city!" said someone in the front row, a remarkably tall Chinese man with fair hair. He spoke Chinese with an accent that Bai Jun recognized as coming from Hong Kong. "I don't care if you think it's Chinese territory. This is Terrania. We want to build our city, so get lost. If you must be here, act like a guest."

"We'll bear that in mind." Bai Jun gave a light bow. "At this moment, we are searching for some criminals and have therefore

assumed police power in this city. Only for a short time, to be clear!"

"Does one of these so-called criminals happen to be named Rhodan?" called someone from the second row.

The general didn't even acknowledge this. He gave his soldiers further instructions; they were to leave the civilians in peace as much as they could. Above all, they were not to use their firearms.

The soldiers divided themselves up between the closest buildings and searched them. The general doubted they would find their targets in there. There were more effective hiding places, such as sand bunkers, or—better still—simply mixing in with the people.

He withdrew his soldiers from the buildings and had them regroup. "We stay together!" he ordered, then they went on.

Bai Jun saw Marshall repeatedly close his eyes, then shake his head before opening them again. He heard soft crying coming from a building pit. The men secured the area, and Bai Jun walked over to the hoarding fence. A man with two children was squatting in the mud at the base of the pit. He looked European.

"You there!" called the general in English. "Can we help you?"

The man didn't react; maybe he didn't understand English. Something metallic gleamed in the sunlight. It looked like a knife, and the man was holding it as if he planned to stab the children.

"A rope! Quick!" Bai Jun commanded.

One of the soldiers was suitably equipped and reacted instantly; he lowered the rope into the pit. It reached almost to the bottom. Bai Jun quickly clambered down and interceded to stop the man.

"You can't do that," he said. "It's not the children's fault."

The European stared at him with empty eyes. It was clear that the man didn't know what he was doing. Bai Jun sent the confused fellow into the realm of dreams with a brief strike to his throat.

"You don't need to be afraid," he said to the boy and girl, both between eight and ten years old. "Everything's going to be fine."

He tasked two soldiers with taking care of them. "Give them something to eat and drink. The man needs medical attention. Take all three of them straight to the infirmary."

Loud noise could suddenly be heard from another part of Terrania. Shots had been fired, their reverberations ringing out across the city. Bai Jun hoped that his soldiers had kept to his orders and only shot into the air.

He reassigned a corporal from his group to see to the matter.

“Ensure calm!” he said. “If need be, we’ll leave the people alone; they’re all confused at the moment.”

Bai Jun and his companions kept moving. The general turned to the telepath. “Still nothing?”

Marshall shook his head. Sweat glistened on his brow. “I can’t find anything. When we arrived, I thought I could read Reginald Bull’s thoughts for a moment. But I was imagining it.”

A hissing and rattling sounded from somewhere nearby. The general tried to determine where it was coming from, but that was easier said than done. It was difficult. Among the cuboid buildings, the sound seemed to come from all directions.

Bai Jun pointed at a corporal and his team. “Try to find out what that is, and where,” he ordered. “Right away!”

A sand cloud rose up from between the buildings, marking the origin of the hissing. A faint melodic sound was mixed with it, underlaid by a similarly soft whirring.

Bai Jun knew these noises. They came from propulsion units. “That’s impossible,” he said. “The *Stardust* was destroyed.”

Information started filtering in via com. The general ran down the streets, turning right, then left, then right again. Beyond the next building, they’d reached the launch site. Hundreds of people were standing around a large hole in the ground. Next to it lay discarded coverings.

A strange entity hung in the air, about ten meters above the ground, an angular frame with a bulky interior and six spider legs underneath. Bai Jun couldn’t make out either of the pilots.

He had the soldiers pull several of the civilians aside and asked them, “Who’s sitting in the aircraft?”

“Perry Rhodan and Reginald Bull,” came the answer.

Bai Jun ground his teeth. He hadn’t expected a development like this. Now, when his goal had been within reach, the two astronauts had foiled his best-laid plans.

“They’re trying to flee!” the general exclaimed.

Marshall nodded. “It sure looks that way.”

“We have to stop them!”

“Too late.”

Bai Jun reached for the com device. “Sharpshooters, get into position in front of the city. You’ll receive your orders in code.”

“Surely he’s not planning to...” began Anne Sloane. She was about to tackle the general, but Marshall stopped her.

“Trust is not your favorite word,” said Bai Jun soberly. “If you’d like to inspect my encoded orders, be my guest! My soldiers’ aim won’t be to hit the escapees but to shoot past them. I’m deploying the sharpshooters especially to prevent any accidental direct hits.”

“What a messed-up world,” Anne Sloane murmured.

“Right this second, we’re working behind the scenes to make it better in the future. Follow me!”

A message came from the com device. “Sharpshooters and missile launchers are ready.”

“Keep a minimum distance of twenty meters from the target when firing missiles. Sharpshooters may hit the vehicle’s frame, but not the propulsion unit or the pilots.”

“Understood!”

High above them, the spider turned and raced away. The frame hung in the air at a precarious angle, as if it were about to crash. The word “Kamikaze!” slipped out of Bai Jun’s mouth. Fascinated, he observed the wide curve in which the vehicle flew.

“They’re not kamikaze pilots,” said Marshall dryly. “They’re American test pilots. They’re used to this kind of thing.”

The cross between a flounder and a trampoline fluttered dangerously. Several times, the general heard the *pling, pling* of shots finding their marks. His men shot a few of their ground-to-air missiles and one of the hyper-modern RAK rockets. The vehicle disappeared behind the hills.

“Cease your fire,” said Bai Jun. “They won’t get too far in that piece of junk anyway. There’s no need to follow them. All units, I hereby impose a general news blackout.”

He knew that his order was a dangerous choice. His superiors could demand a reckoning for it. They’d interpret it as collaboration with an enemy of the state, and that was a heavy offense.

The news blackout had an advantage, however. No one who had taken part in the shooting would leak a single word. The remaining soldiers of his division would discover just as little as the secret service agents. The only information would come from Bai Jun himself when he appeared to report to high command.

The general nodded to Marshall. “Let’s keep searching!”

5.

July 12, 2036

A short, loud *crack* tore Rhodan out of his half-asleep state. "What was..."

Lethargically, he blinked in the sunlight—and the next moment, he was wide awake. He watched as a broken pole on the nose wobbled heavily, tore off, and banged against the *Phoenix*'s underside. Something jangled like broken glass, then one of the jet cones conked out.

"Goddammit it!" Bull swore. "That thing damaged one of the cones!"

The horizon tilted. The karstic landscape below the spider swung upwards. They moved towards a wall of hills, cliffs, and gorges. Bull wrenched at the control stick, his feet working the pedals that steered the rudders. The vehicle jerked, bucked, and turned on its vertical axis.

"Reduce thrust at the back!" said Rhodan. "It's not safe otherwise."

"That's what I'm—"

The landscape fell away below them; the blue sky again took up the entire horizon above the *Phoenix*.

"Perry, to the right side!"

Rhodan heaved himself out of his seat and clambered along the frame. Bull had to balance out the thrust with the intact jet cones on the vehicle's right, but for that he needed a counterweight until the homemade craft was flying level again.

Hanging onto a pole with one arm, Rhodan leaned out into the abyss. This was not all that effective; he weighed too little. But there wasn't enough time to swap places with his companion.

"More!" said Bull. "A little farther! That's better already. Could you maybe—"

"Let go completely?"

They both laughed. As long as they hadn't lost their gallows

humor, there was still hope.

Rhodan held on to one of the steel wires that Bull had used to bind the pipes together. He stepped on the outermost pipe and leaned out as far as he could go. It didn't make a huge difference compared to before—around thirty centimeters.

"Perfect. Now don't move!"

The *Phoenix* righted itself a touch. The spider achieved temporary stability at an angle of around twenty-five degrees.

"This won't work for long," said Bull ominously.

Rhodan only wondered how long it would be.

They made it ten minutes, then the damaged cone broke off with an ugly crunch. The *Phoenix* tilted dangerously forward. Rhodan knew the feeling. He'd experienced it in an old hobby plane shortly after he first got his pilot's license. The vehicle had fallen into a tailspin and spiraled downward, propeller first.

This was much the same, with a small but decisive difference. A typical aircraft *flew*. Even with a breakdown of the propulsion units, the pilot could keep it in the air for a certain amount of time.

The *Phoenix* was about as aerodynamic as a rock. If it broke down, it would drop like one. And if the thrust was out of balance, it would start to spin around its own axis. Balancing it out by shifting weight was no longer an option. They had to land right away.

The shaking subsided a little. Puffing and panting, Bull increased the thrust and set the spider at a slightly shallower angle, though without being able to keep it from sinking. Rhodan tried to estimate their height. They had to still be at least twenty meters up.

The *Phoenix* sank as if it had fallen into an air pocket. It braked, then dropped again. Rhodan clenched his teeth together and hooked his hands around the frame. They were still at around ten meters, as high as a house. That was enough for a broken neck or other serious injuries.

He gnashed his teeth. Bull cried, "Hold on ti—" but Rhodan didn't hear the rest.

The spider rubbed against something, presumably a tree. Another followed, then came a gap into which the vehicle fell. The spider plunged into a dense collection of mountain pines and other low trees, cushioning it, and then tilted sideways in slow motion.

"Heaven help us!" Bull groaned.

Rhodan estimated they were at most five or six meters from the

ground. The *Phoenix*, which measured twelve meters across, could only tilt far enough to touch the Earth. If their luck was bad, it could also fall over. However, it couldn't crash anymore. The spider hung in the thicket at a steep diagonal angle and didn't stir anymore.

Rhodan unfastened his seat belt. "Time to get out, buddy!"

Behind the helmet visor, he saw a pale face with strange red stripes. Or, looking at it the other way, a red face with strange white stripes.

"A tomato wearing suspenders!" Rhodan laughed dryly.

"Shhh!" went Bull. "Don't move. Maybe with a rope I can—"

"Come on now!" Rhodan raised himself up and started climbing. "Safety rule number one: always exit upward. To make sure the vehicle doesn't fall on you."

This prompted a disconcerted look. Bull waited until Rhodan had clambered down and was out of range of the vehicle. Only then did he follow. The *Phoenix* wavered a little as he climbed over its edge and followed Rhodan's tips for the safest route over the frame.

Shortly after, they stood on a small rise beside the low trees and looked at each other. Rhodan dusted off his pants as he tried to get his breath back.

"Everything okay, Perry?" Bull asked quietly.

"Yeah, apart from a few bruises. The suits prevented anything worse."

Without the Arkonide protective gear, they wouldn't have avoided a few broken bones.

Bull was relieved. "I'm fine too. Until I look at our aircraft. Then I feel *very* different."

They walked around the spider-legged mass. The landing gear had partly broken off, and the same was true of the pipe structure that made up the frame. Bull crawled sideways along the vehicle, under a few shrubs, and lit up the underside with his helmet lamp.

"The two cones on the right side are flat as pancakes," he said. "If only they were real pancakes. At least that would give us something to eat. The left two are damaged."

He worked his way out from under the shrubs, then went across to a rock and sat on it.

"The situation couldn't be any worse," he snarled. "Crest is in the hands of the US authorities and is going to face a trial. It wouldn't surprise me if they executed him on camera. Eric and Dr.

Haggard are being slandered as traitors like us, the *Aetron* was destroyed, the *Stardust*'s landing site has been overrun. And we're sitting here in the Australian bush with our pile of scrap metal, twiddling our thumbs. I'm taking off my helmet, Perry. I have to puke."

"Then be glad all you've eaten is a chocolate bar. At least you won't sully the beauty of nature *too* much."

Bull snorted. "All right then, Mr. Optimist! Show me the silver lining, the light at the end of the tunnel."

"Crest is still alive. He looks like he's been cured; he seemed healthy on the TV broadcast. We're alive too. And the landing site in the Gobi is a symbol. We haven't exactly lost much there, if anything."

"Bai Jun and his government won't fork over any of it now that it's in their mitts. Not the robots, not the buildings, not our comrades. And not the shield generator either."

"During our escape, we were shot at by a whole army, but not one shot actually hit us. The Chinese army tends to have a better rate of accuracy than that. As for the generator, it's secured with a code. If the wrong person tries to use it, it'll destroy itself." Rhodan turned his attention back to their battered aircraft. "Do you think you can fix it?" He gestured to the remains of the spacedrive.

"Maybe, if we can find a workshop. But what good will that do?"

"We have to free Crest, Eric, and Dr. Haggard!"

"You really *have* lost your mind! We're barely surviving ourselves. And putting that aside, if I've ever smelled a trap, it's that ridiculous trial!"

"Maybe. But do you have a better idea?"

"Nope!"

They climbed the nearby hill and saw a small settlement in the valley to the northwest. Rhodan looked out for vehicles and helicopters. There were passenger cars and plenty of pickup trucks, but none of them were heading for the mountains. No one down there had noticed the strange aircraft or its crash.

"We have two options," said Rhodan. "We rent a car, or we try to get everything we need to repair the *Phoenix* from a workshop."

"Which means I have to go down there, right?"

"They don't know your face as well as mine."

"Fine then." Bull peeled himself out of his suit. "I'll look

around. If you don't hear anything from me by morning, I've had second thoughts."

"Careful they don't lynch you the moment they see you. And don't forget the food!"

6.

The Past

"Tamika?"

Thora's wrist was caught in a vise-like grip. Tamika's fingers didn't let go as the two women plunged through the darkness towards the second planet's surface in their reconnaissance ship. Thora estimated there were only a few seconds left before the vehicle crashed into the surface crust of the world the humans called Venus.

A paper-thin glimmer of light formed from the friction heat, roughly tracing the ship's outline. There was a violent, painful jerk, as if Thora's hand had been ripped off. However, she could still move her fingers inside the glove.

In the deep red halo around the reconnaissance ship, a dark hole emerged. Thora hurtled through it. The glowing silhouette rapidly fell behind her. The painful pressure on her wrist no longer existed.

"Tamika? Quiniu?"

It was silent around her. A blow hit the pilot seat, where the safety bar still kept her in place. St. Elmo's fire suddenly shimmered around the metal trough of the footwell. The propulsive charges on the underside of the seat had fired, ejecting her from the ship; simultaneously, the braking parachute's fluorescent material had billowed out high above her.

The Arkonide breathed a sigh of relief. At least the seat's systems were still functioning, along with its height and distance scanners.

She see-sawed downward like a luminescent deep-sea organism. Again she called the two women's names. The ship's silhouette lit up, glaringly bright, then disappeared from view. The other ship offered no visible trace and no response.

"I need data!" she demanded of her heavy battledress's Positronic. "Height, speed, temperature..."

“At your service, Commander! Distance from the surface is two kilometers,” replied the computer’s voice. “Now one kilometer.”

I’m about to crash!

“One point eight kilometers. Accurate distance cannot be ascertained. Scanning is impeded by an excessive scanner beam reflection rate due to atmospheric gases.”

“How fast am I descending?”

“I calculate an approximate descent rate of twenty meters per second. This is derived from the thrust of the brake nozzles and the tensile force acting on the parachute ropes.”

That was seventy-two kilometers per hour—much too fast to land softly in a reconnaissance ship’s pneumatic chair.

“Brake harder,” she said, her voice raw. She had a lump in her throat.

“Braking efficiency will be impacted by a strong increase in air pressure, Commander. I advise against it.”

Thora knew what the average reading was on the surface. Ninety-two bar, which was equivalent to water pressure 910 meters below sea level.

“You needn’t worry, Commander,” the Positronic continued. “Shortly before touchdown, the seat will release your battledress, which will rise ten to twenty meters into the air using its own pulser units and provide a comfortable landing.”

“Assuming the automated functions are working correctly. Is Tamika all right? I still have no contact with her.”

“Her position is unknown, as is that of Quiniu Soptor and her vehicle.”

In the darkness, an intense red fire blazed up. The blinding flash of an explosion followed. Moments later, thunder rolled towards her, an orgy of noise that set the air masses into motion and sent her seat surging upwards. Course-correcting jets steered against it. For a few moments, the Arkonide saw the lined structures of the massifs below before darkness descended over the scenery again.

The crash site is in the direction indicated by the fault line pattern, Thora impressed upon herself. “Commander’s log, Thora da Zoltral! Landing in enemy territory. Cannot exclude the possibility of enemy capture. Will try to establish contact with my copilot and the second reconnaissance ship.”

The safety bar sprang up. The seat gave her a light shove that

threw her forward. At the same time, the rear supply pack began to vibrate evenly. The propulsion unit engaged, pushing the battledress both forward and upward. The external microphones conveyed the muffled impact of the pneumatic seat hitting the Venusian surface. Between the gas clouds, Thora made out the tiny navigation lights, which bounced up and down several times before finally disappearing.

"Commander, I'll prepare for landing," the Positronic informed her.

By now, the system had cut the speed down to roughly two meters per second. Thora counted the moments until the rocky ground, shining wetly, appeared in the beam of the helmet's flashlight. The suit set itself upright, and her boots touched down on the ground. The Arkonide bent at the knees to absorb the momentum, taking two, three, four steps forward before coming to a stop.

"The system has landed safely," the Positronic informed her. "Switching automatically to the strongest resource-saving mode to ensure survival for as long as possible."

Thora knew what that meant. Anti-grav would stay switched off. She had to walk.

In an instant, the ninety-two bar pressure weighed on the suit. The computer rapidly increased the internal pressure; otherwise, Thora would have already been crushed by the pressure outside. Still as a boulder, she stood there hoping she would soon wake up from this nightmare.

"Tamika?" she asked again. "Come in!"

Silence. All she heard was electrostatic crackling.

In the light from her helmet, Thora searched the surrounding area. Her range of vision was less than five meters. Every kind of sensor beam was reflected, and nothing came up on the scanner. The air pressure was extremely high, the atmosphere very dense. There was no wind, not even the tiniest gust. You could have cut the air with a knife.

"Logbook entry. Our reconnaissance ship was shot down by an unknown enemy. Distance between artillery and crash site measures an estimated three to five kilometers. I will search for Tamika and destroy the artillery."

That was easier said than done. She stood in darkness, the beam from her helmet petering out just three meters away. The fog

swallowed it up as if feeding on it.

Thora stretched out her arms. She walked back and forth for a while, following the fault lines on the ground. It was clear that tectonic activity had divided the planet's surface into geometric segments. It looked like a ridged parquet floor made of almost equally sized pieces, the lines running parallel and perpendicular to the fault lines.

With outstretched arms, the Arkonide pointed in the direction where the ship's wreckage had to be. She again tried to reach her companion via com but received no response. The star gods had certainly had it in for her since the *Aetron* had entered this solar system. She'd been stranded on Earth's moon and forced to go to Earth, and now she was lost on Venus. She had hoped for a better start.

The last thing she'd received before the crash was a distress call from the *Aetron*.

"Make sure I walk forward in a straight line," she told the battledress's computer.

Her aim was to reach the wreckage. She'd be able to use the plumes of flame to establish the ship's position.

After a few hundred steps, the fog grew thicker; she had to move more slowly. Her helmet's visor began to fog up. She noticed fine branching patterns on the suit's material and asked the Positronic about it.

"Carbon dioxide rain," the computer responded after an initial analysis. "The drops lose their shape due to the high pressure, forming fluid structures reminiscent of crystals or fractals."

With a mixture of fascination and disgust, she observed the strange formations on the suit as she marched on. Whenever she ran a gloved hand along her arm, the patterns melted, leaving streaks upon which more thin veinlets soon formed.

The thick fog cleared away; the rain stopped. Thora's field of view extended to a hundred, then nearly two hundred meters. A sort of tunnel opened up in the thick soup of carbon dioxide. The beam from her helmet cast a diffused twilight across the expanse. At the end, the beam petered away into nothing, as before.

Thora seized the opportunity and picked up the pace. How probable was it that Quiniu Soptor had reacted correctly in the moment of crisis? The extremely high stress factors made it dubious. She was more likely to have become incapable of acting.

In all probability, the second ship had been shot down just like hers.

Thora considered her own chances as well. She had survived the crash, that was all. With a little luck, she'd find the wreckage and the base that had fired on her.

And then?

Outside help could only come from the Moon. The *Aetron* had knowledge of the reconnaissance ships' courses and most recent destinations. However, Crest was on Earth with Rhodan, and he was the only Arkonide who would have been able to make decisions that would help her.

Thora knew from dozens of memo sessions at the start of her training that every factor spoke against her. In principle, she was already dead.

Five days. Her supplies of air, water, and nutrients wouldn't last any longer than that. That half a tonta—close to three quarters of an hour—had already passed did nothing to comfort her.

An invisible hand grasped at her surroundings, wiping the tunnel away and the brightness with it. In an instant, she stood in the dark again, with the beam of light ending three meters from her helmet.

The Arkonide pressed her lips together. *A devil world,* she thought. *Nothing is left of this once blossoming planet. No water, no oceans, no oxygen atmosphere, no vegetation.*

Eons ago, Venus had undoubtedly still had a circle of organic life. At that time, the sun had had three quarters of its current luminosity. Perhaps that would change if humanity reached Venus one day.

"Pah!"

That would never happen. These beings were barbarians, a backwards people. It bordered on nonsense to put Arkonide technology in their hands as Crest had—and as she herself had, she was forced to admit. But she'd had no choice. Perry Rhodan had blackmailed her. The Terran had recognized that she would never tolerate Crest coming to harm. She had yielded to that Terran barbarian.

A grave error, she now knew! She should never have given in to such sentimentality, especially not where a member of a backward race was concerned.

"Quiniu?" she tried again. "If you're up there somewhere,

answer me. Or have the computer answer."

There's no one to hear you. No one alive.

The thought of being alone in this netherworld seemed so strange and absurd that she burst into brief, choppy laughter. In the faintly reflective helmet visor, she stared at a pale grimace with red eyes, framed by white hair.

Visibility outside grew worse than ever before. She could see no farther than the length of her arm. It made no sense to keep going.

"You shouldn't wait here, Commander!" the Positronic warned.

She felt light tremors running through the ground. They came from the direction she was walking towards, where the crashed ship was likely to be. The ground shook like an unsupported structure; she felt like she was on a sea voyage. The computer reported that the ground temperature increased in their direction of movement.

Thora kept going. She walked faster than before, which was quite an undertaking. The fault lines still ran along to her left, broken up at regular intervals by the crosslines of the parquet. The rocky ground had a similar consistency to basalt.

The fog stirred. It began to wander from right to left as a light suction took hold of her suit. The gas masses of the lowest air layer were moving with increasing speed.

The ship's scanners had observed this phenomenon during their approach to the planet. In the equatorial region, enormous gas masses continually rose up and streamed into the polar regions, where they sank to lower altitudes before flowing back to the equator at ground level.

At these deep altitudes, suction centers formed that then reached as high as fifty kilometers to the main cloud layer.

Thora watched the visual depiction on her suit's small monitor. It uncannily resembled Earth's warm and cold ocean currents. Venus's atmosphere behaved like an ocean.

The fog streaming up looked like it was breathing. The suction pulled them upward, then they sank a little way back, only to rise again and reach greater heights. This happened so ceaselessly that it resembled a huge life-form.

The floor pulsated just as continually. If the Arkonide hadn't known better, she'd have thought Venus was a planet-sized organism.

The suction grew ever stronger. The air pressure sank rapidly to fifty, then twenty bar. The Positronic continually regulated the

battledress's internal pressure accordingly.

Alongside its upward movement, the fog turned in a circle, slowly at first, then faster and faster. It formed a funnel akin to a whirlwind or a hurricane. Thora found herself unexpectedly in the eye of the storm.

"Can you detect what's happening high above us?" she asked.

"The cloud layer is an impenetrable barrier. Below that is nothing worth mentioning. However, with some luck we will pierce through it."

"Luck?"

"The suction is too strong for you to stay in place. Your suit will be launched into the upper strata of the atmosphere, then return to the surface in the polar region."

Perhaps from there she'd be able to reach the second ship. However, landing in the polar region meant certain death.

The ground disappeared beneath her feet. She was dragged upward as if on a bungee cord; the distance display climbed to thirty, forty, fifty meters.

"There's a chance that you will lose consciousness, Commander. I will act according to your best interests."

Thora da Zoltral saw the fog banks surging upward. The suction pulled at her suit and accelerated it from zero to a hundred in two seconds flat.

Then came sudden calm. Sideways motion maneuvered the suit to the middle of the whirlwind, as if dragging it on a string. There she hung, weightless and still, as the Venusian atmosphere swirled around her no more than a hundred meters away.

"Tamika? Quiniu?"

Her hope that the change in weather conditions would make com signals get through were soon dashed.

As if to add insult to injury, the battledress dropped suddenly, falling into the depths like a stone. The pulser unit came online to provide counterthrust. This propelled Thora out of the eye's center and close to the edge. There, the opposing forces balanced each other out and the Arkonide softly floated down towards the ground.

"The whirlwind's suction is waning," the Positronic reported.

It might as well have said, "Escape attempt failed."

Thora kept watch. She turned in a circle and looked around. The suction lessened; the tornado lost its circular form. Instead, it stretched out into a tunnel, for the first time opening up to give a

view of the planet's horizon. It curved upward rather than down; due to the dense atmosphere and the high air pressure, the perspective appeared warped to the Arkonide's eyes. Thora observed this phenomenon, fascinated.

The tunnel filled up with gas masses from all sides. A storm broke out. The Positronic checked the shield generator and the propulsion unit. The air pressure increased dramatically.

The tunnel's side walls were racing towards one another with increasing speed. Shortly before one wall reached Thora's position, the protective shield sprang to life. The propulsion unit engaged at full thrust, pivoting the battledress into a horizontal position to give the oncoming storm wall as little air resistance as possible.

A violent strike hit the shield. Despite the inertial damper, some of the force made it through to the Arkonide's body. The impact knocked the air from her lungs. Her vision turned dark. Specks of light resembling stars flickered on and then vanished again. Then there was nothing.

Someone was pounding against her suit. With some effort, she raised her arms to defend herself. *Where am I?*

"Tamika? Did you find me?" Her voice sounded strange. The strikes against her suit continued.

"Commander!"

At last, Thora da Zoltral found the energy to open her eyes. Black flakes drifted in front of her helmet. They fluttered up and down, their tips shaking as if they were waving at her. The heavy pounding continued.

"Commander, are you awake?"

The Positronic! Thora relaxed, both relieved and disappointed. She bent her arms and wiped her visor with her gloves. The flakes on it disappeared, only to return again immediately.

"I'll put you back on your feet," said the computer.

"Where am I?"

"On the ground. I deemed it sensible to bring you to ground level to prevent you from drifting too far afield."

The pounding came from her helmet, which was repeatedly banging against the ground. It stopped once the battledress righted itself and Thora was standing again. On the inside of the helmet was a blurry reflection of a furious expression.

"And now?" she asked.

Around her, countless black flakes wafted through the air, following her like a swarm of fish. Thora investigated them with the scanner. They were fragments of fog that had been saturated with fine basalt powder.

With heavy steps, she continued on her way.

"What about the wreckage?" she wanted to know. "With a bird's eye view, were you able to find any clues as to its location?"

"No, but it can't be much farther."

The Arkonide shook her head. She was skeptical of the Positronic's statements. This planet was different from Earth. For one thing, it rotated in the opposite direction. Venus went clockwise; the sun rose in the west and set in the east.

Also, the atmosphere was composed of several cloud layers. The lowest and thickest blocked off the atmosphere close to the ground, letting only a small amount of light and warmth get through. What did make it to the ground couldn't be reflected back into space. A true greenhouse climate.

The ground beneath her feet followed different physical rules as well. The parquet pattern, the pulsating, the heat—it all indicated activity occurring right below the surface.

Venus was an inhospitable world, and Thora could have believed that everything was conspiring against her. In front of her eyes, the parquet's right-angled lines were contorting into wide, sweeping arcs. The black flakes gnawed at her helmet visor.

"I'm losing my beari—"

Thora stood stock still. In the soup of fog, faces were staring at her. Speechless, expressionless faces. Death masks. One of them belonged to Quiniu, another to Tamika. Between the two, she recognized a bony, sunken mask. Crest.

Thora dashed forward, trying to grasp at them. The Positronic intervened and blocked the suit's movement system.

"Tamika!" cried Thora. "Crest!"

"There is no one there," said the computer.

"Right there!" she insisted. "A shadow in the fog!" She wanted to go there, but the suit refused to let her move from the spot.

"One moment, Commander! I'll analyze the problem."

Thora felt a slight pain behind her forehead. As she trekked onward, it became a long-term guest. Her nose stung.

"More oxygen," she wheezed.

"Commander," the Positronic said almost simultaneously, "I am

measuring a slight drop in pressure. The suit has a leak."

She started searching for it but couldn't find it. Presumably it was a micro-tear caused by the hurricane.

"Find it and patch it, quickly!" she ordered. Venus's high air pressure was literally pushing the poisonous atmosphere into her suit.

The multilayered suit came to life. Sensors slid their way through the fabric, checking for the presence of oxygen and carbon dioxide.

Again the Arkonide saw a shadow in the fog. She was sure she could make out irregular movements. It wasn't Tamika. That left only one explanation.

"The enemy is extremely close," she murmured. "I can see and feel them."

A gray haze began to obscure her vision. The burning smell in her nose grew more intense. It reminded her of rotten eggs. *The smell of sulfur!*

From the calculation models, she knew that sulfur was mostly present at high altitudes and above the cloud layers. The suction from the good weather hole had briefly caused a change. For an oxygen breather, good weather on Venus was deadly.

"The tear is in the supply pack," said the Positronic. "The lethal gas is entering via the shoulder area."

"Hurry! I can hardly breathe!"

Through the haze, she again saw the shadow in the fog. The bizarre humanoid outline of a being that was presumably suited to conditions on Venus.

With great caution, she moved sideways into the fog until she could only barely still see the shape. What mattered was getting away from this alien thing.

"The internal leak is sealed," the Positronic reported. "Do you feel an improvement?"

"No! There must be another leak."

Her breath had become fitful. Her vision was blurry. Blood pulsed in her ears. Thora felt her knees giving out. Fear rose in her, fear of asphyxiating or falling into the hands of the enemy that had shot down her ship. She dragged herself onward, the air pressure weighing on her shoulders like a mountain.

Suddenly the figure was there again, close enough to reach out and touch, and yet not much more than the outline of a strange

form. Dark flakes fluttered around it; the sight made Thora think of symbiotes. By now, she could hardly stay on her feet.

"I'm going to suffocate!" she groaned.

The Positronic increased the oxygen supply again. It helped a little, but in the process she lost a portion of the supply she was depending on to live.

To her left, the figure emerged from the fog. Thora dodged it again, taking a zigzag course. But she couldn't manage more than clumsy hobbling, and the entity followed her.

Then it was right in front of her. She ran into its arms, or tentacles. Panic overcame her. She moved to pull her hand beamer out of its holster and make a stand, but she was far too slow. The shape grabbed hold of her and dragged her to the ground.

7.

July 11, 2036

"You know," said the old man in the pilot's seat loudly, "a nuclear explosion like that isn't something to take lightly. It gives off a huge amount of deadly radiation. Or not. Hmm, there's no dragon in the air."

"What do you mean?" Sue asked.

The uniformed Chinese man put in a great deal of effort to speak comprehensible English, but sometimes she still didn't know what he was talking about.

"When an atom bomb explodes, it releases radiation, killing every life-form in a radius of several kilometers. The blast wave destroys every building. A radioactive desert remains there for a long time. In this case, however, there was no more than a mild breeze that wafted over the Gobi. A little radiation was released, but it didn't do any damage. If I didn't know better, I'd call the bomb a fake. Its one and only goal: to scare people."

"Who would do that?"

"Some kind of intelligence agent, for example."

"Is that what *you* are?"

"No. Otherwise I'd know exactly what was going on."

"I figured. I'm Sue, by the way!"

She extended her hand to him. He took it and shook firmly. Sue was stunned to realize that his hand wasn't much larger than her own.

"Huang Chao!" he said. "Chao is my given name. I'm a colonel in the People's Liberation Army. I've served under General Bai Jun for thirty years."

The old soldier served the general unwaveringly, Sue had observed. He'd accepted the statement that her friend Sid could travel from one place to another with the power of thought as naturally as if he'd been told what time lunch was.

"Are we nearly there, Chao?"

“I can already see the site of the explosion.”

Sue craned her neck to get some partial view of what was outside. The small military helicopter, which had room for exactly two people, descended towards the ground with a heavy rattling sound. She looked for a crater, since everyone had talked about an enormous crater that the explosion would have left, but she saw no such thing. Instead, a lake with a smooth, reflective surface stretched out across the sand.

“That’s impossible,” Huang Chao murmured. “How does that happen? Look, Sue!”

“I’m strapped in.”

“Oh, yeah. Feel free to unstrap yourself. We’re almost on the ground.”

She undid the belt and climbed up onto her seat. “Now I see what you mean.”

From the glassy surface, thin shafts rose up at more or less regular distances apart, somewhat broader at the bottom and getting thinner farther up. At the top of each sat a tiny ball that looked like a raindrop.

“I’ve seen this shape before,” said Sue. “When drops of water fall onto the surface of a lake and then bounce up again, it looks just like this.”

“The result of water’s adhesive force.” The colonel nodded. “Instead of water, this is sand turned to glass. The heat of the explosion melted it, forming a liquid surface that shot up wherever small grains fell in. What we see here are the splashes from when the sand cooled. Solidified splashes!” He shook his head. “Here we are, anyway. One last look at the Geiger counter. Look! The radiation is in the millisievert range. Safe for us and safe for your friend. What was his name again?”

“Sid. Sid González.”

Huang Chao kept the helicopter at a height of ten meters. He circled the lake and shone the vehicle’s headlights at it. Depending on where the light fell, Sue could make out every shadow, every tiny fracture in the glazed surface. She strained her eyes, spotting human-shaped silhouettes that revealed themselves as mere optical illusions when they got closer. She saw a shoe that turned out to be a small heap of sand that had also solidified and been covered in a molten film.

“So, what does your Sid look like?” the pilot asked after a

while.

"Slender, even slightly emaciated."

Sid had worn himself down by teleporting over and over. He'd set out again to take the bomb out of the tunnel and put it somewhere farther away after his energy had already been depleted.

There was only one thing Sue knew for sure: Sid had managed it, presumably with the last of his strength. The bomb had exploded far away, as far as he'd been able to reach in one jump or several.

"He's not here," she said. "Not at the explosion site."

"That's a good sign."

"Colonel, let's keep searching!"

"I'm on it, young lady!"

The helicopter traced wider circles around the center. Not one square meter of ground remained unchecked. Sue noticed that Huang Chao alternated between looking with his naked eye and binoculars. This was the first time since meeting the general and the other officers that the presence of a Chinese soldier had felt comfortable. Huang Chao was like a grandfather to her.

Every so often, the colonel cast her a confirmatory glance. After a half hour, he cleared his throat. "You know, it's entirely possible that Sid's not here anymore. Maybe a patrol found him and took him to the nearest base. Then we'll never find him here."

"That would be good. He'd be safe, then." It didn't escape her notice that Huang Chao softly shook his head. "What's wrong with thinking that?"

"He's not Chinese. The soldiers will immediately recognize him as one of Rhodan's followers and treat him accordingly."

"They'll give him something to eat and drink, won't they?"

"Yes, most certainly."

"Then there's no problem for Sid. As soon as he has energy again, he'll escape."

"Soldiers have a tendency to shoot escapees. They might think he's a spy."

"He's only a teenager."

"He's taller than some of our soldiers. That could give him trouble."

"I trust you. You can set him free."

"Not directly. What I can do is demand that he be handed over to me in the name of General Bai Jun."

“That would be good. I think we can save ourselves the journey, though. He wouldn’t be there for long.”

“If you say so. How do you feel about this idea: if we don’t find him here, we’ll fly to the base and look before we return to the city.”

“I don’t know. Can you trust the soldiers there? I wouldn’t want them to take *me* captive.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep you safe.”

The helicopter continued to circle. To avoid always exposing the same side to the burning sun, the colonel slowly turned it around its own axis.

“There!” cried Sue suddenly. “There he is, walking! Sid! Sid!”

She wondered why her friend wasn’t reacting. Then she realized the helicopter was making too much noise. But wouldn’t he turn around when he heard it?

Sue was alarmed. The explosion might have deafened him. She watched him sluggishly drag himself along the sand. Now the vehicle’s shadow fell over him, but he still didn’t react. Had he turned blind as well?

“What do you see?” asked the colonel.

“Go down, quick! I have to help him.”

“It’s just a desert fox running away from the noise of the helicopter. That’s all.”

She slapped her forehead. “And there was me thinking it was Sid.”

“When the sand shimmers in the sun, it interferes with your vision, making you see things that aren’t there. There are also haishishenlou. Mirages. A physical phenomenon caused by refraction of light rays through air layers with extremely stark differences in temperature. You see a town or river or oasis that’s actually a few hundred kilometers away. Haishishenlou have led many a wanderer astray in the desert.”

By now, they were circling at a radius of several kilometers. Huang Chao changed the route and flew in zigzag lines across the desert, making the lines longer or shorter depending on visibility.

Sue’s eyes had started burning. The colonel handed her a clean handkerchief she could use to wipe away the secretions. Little by little, tears began to be mixed in.

“You’re scared for him,” he said. “I understand. Good friends miss each other very quickly.”

She noticed him checking the displays. “Out of gas?”

“No, not yet. We can’t keep flying forever, though. At some point I have to go back to base. And deliver you to the general.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Suddenly, Sue gestured to a tiny dark spot in the sand.

“What’s that?”

Huang Chao brought them lower. “Looks like a shoe.”

“Land! Quickly!” She could hardly wait to open the door and rush out.

“Careful, girl!” said the soldier. “The sand out there is blazing hot.”

Huang Chao was a skilled pilot. He landed on a slab of rock next to the shoe. Then he opened the door, leaned out, and examined the area.

“A shoe,” he said. “Do you recognize it?”

“That’s his shoe. Sid...” She fell silent with shock.

“It doesn’t mean anything,” said the colonel, trying to reassure her. “At least we have a clue.”

Sue forgot about everything around her. She stared at this shoe as if under a spell. Her mind painted a foot in this shoe, and a leg—a whole Sid. He waved at her and said, “Hi!”

“Hi!” she replied. “Where’s your other shoe, Sid?”

“Lost. Don’t know where.” And then he disappeared in a rain of sparks.

Sue cried. “Chao, I couldn’t bear it if we found another shoe. Or any of his clothes. Please, no!”

“Calm down, Sue. If we find his clothes, we’ll find him. He lost his shoe when he ran before the explosion. The blast wave...”

She could tell that he didn’t want to take away all her hope.

“Listen,” he said, “if we don’t find him here, he might not be at the base either. But that’s exactly why we’ll go straight to the infirmary when we get there and check.”

“John could find him. We need to get John.”

“If you mean John Marshall, he’s busy helping the general. You know the situation’s complicated. Even I don’t know how Bai Jun will bring all this to a happy conclusion. Maybe your Sid will make the difference.”

“The blast wave,” Sue insisted. “What were you about to say about the blast wave?”

“Nothing, really. The real danger is the heat at the center of the

explosion. It quickly reaches a few thousand degrees. If a person was there…there wouldn't be much left of them."

Sue suspected that he'd wanted to tell her that all along. She began to cry uncontrollably. The soldier switched on the autopilot and put his arms around her, holding her tight.

"Don't give up hope. When you do that, you destroy your own soul."

It was easier together. She felt that inwardly the colonel was very close to her now, truly like a fatherly friend or even her own grandfather. He was patient and lenient; he tried to understand her and be as sensitive as possible. Sue had never experienced so much love in her life, not all at once and in such an entirely new way. Here in this helicopter, everything converged on one place and one point in time, and was nonetheless overshadowed by the fate of Sid, which she began to picture in her mind.

Huang Chao could apparently read this on her face. "Don't think about that," he said. "We've now searched an area that covers a semicircle around the core explosion site. We still have the second half ahead of us."

True to his word, he flew in a curve to the north, in the direction of the Mongolian border. Then he resumed a zigzagging course.

In an effort to distract herself, Sue started counting the curved lines they traced. After a few hundred, she lost her patience. Her eyes were burning more strongly, strained by the constant reflections in the sand. She couldn't see a thing anymore and told Chao so.

"Put the handkerchief over your eyes and rest," he suggested. "Leave the search to me. My eyes are used to the glaring light."

She followed his advice, leaning back in her seat and trying to relax. But her neck hurt, and her throat gave signs of inflammation whenever she swallowed. No, she didn't want to get sick now. Or was it because of the radiation?

"Our troops have occupied the city," said Huang Chao. "That's the best thing that could have happened. As long as our soldiers are in control, the secret service can't have their way."

The helicopter changed course. Sue squinted from under the handkerchief. Based on the position of the sun, they were flying roughly eastward and rising higher. Then the helicopter suddenly stopped and spun around on its axis once.

“I see something below,” said the colonel. “An unnaturally shaped sand hill. We should take a look.”

Sue first caught sight of it when the helicopter was just a few meters away. The wind from the rotor blades blew the sand off. The outline of a body steadily grew more apparent.

“Sid!” Sue pulled at the sliding door.

“Away from the door!” called Huang Chao.

Sue ignored him. All she wanted was to get out and go to Sid.

The helicopter suddenly tipped to the side. Sue flew backwards between the seats. The colonel didn’t pay any heed. He weaved the craft back and forth, lowered it, made it rise up again, and then landed it.

The helicopter slid forward and back before finally coming to a stop. Huang Chao pulled down a few levers. The sound faded away as the rotor blades stopped spinning.

“Your behavior was rash,” said Chao. “My mistake, though. I should have told you about the procedure earlier. Give me your hand!” He helped her to her feet. “You can’t just run out into the desert sand. You’d burn your feet and be unable to walk.” He raised his voice and looked piercingly at her. “I also can’t just land anywhere without knowing the terrain. If the helicopter sinks or falls over, we’ll never get away from here. Behind you are boots suitable for the desert. Put them on.”

Sue was so muddled that she didn’t understand what he was saying or doing. “You’ve finally stopped. What was the point of all that?” she asked snippily.

“I was skidding along the ground to test it and find solid rock. We have to hope this will hold the helicopter.”

Sue got into the far-too-big boots with soles as thick as her forearm. Huang Chao similarly changed his footwear, then opened the door.

Sue jumped down into the sand and waded over to the body lying on the ground. From the trousers, the shirt, and the one naked foot, there was no doubt it was him.

“Sid!” she yelled. “Sid!”

The figure didn’t stir. With bare hands, she started to unearth his body and face. Chao appeared next to her and put down a large white case with a red cross on it. After putting a hand on Sid’s throat, he sighed with relief.

“He’s alive!”

He took out a cloth and what looked like a cotton bud. Carefully, he cleaned the sand out of Sid's mouth, nostrils, and eyes. Then he carefully lifted the boy up, brought him into the recovery position, and listened for his breath. Sid's chest rose and fell almost imperceptibly.

Huang Chao wet his index finger with saliva and held it under the boy's nose. Then he patted his cheeks. "He's breathing, but he's unconscious."

Sue stared at Sid's arms and neck. The skin was dark red.

"He was near the explosion." Huang Chao lifted Sid up and carried him to the helicopter.

"He's burned!" Sue wailed.

"More like scalded. Or something in between. We have too little experience with victims of this sort of catastrophe."

Sue helped the colonel rest her friend in the copilot's seat. Huang Chao felt it was better not to strap him in due to the state of his skin. He brought back the first aid kit and prepared wet compresses to draw the heat from Sid's body.

"Sid, can you hear me?"

The boy stirred. Getting the bomb away—he'd managed it with the last of his strength. But he hadn't managed to get himself to safety.

"Hold on tight back there!" Chao said to Sue, turning on the motor. "We're in a hurry."

Sue grabbed on to the cargo net and the backrest of the seat. The helicopter ascended. This time it didn't fly back and forth, but accelerated towards the base with a singular purpose.

"They can help your friend in the infirmary," said Huang Chao. "That much is certain. We'll be there in a quarter of an hour."

Sue didn't let Sid out of her sight. After a while, she was sure she could see his eyelids twitching slightly. "I think he's coming to."

"There are water bottles in the wall compartment. Open one and give him some water to drink," the colonel advised.

Sid opened his eyes. His lips formed her name.

"Drink!" She lifted his head and poured in the fresh, sparkling water. "Everything's fine. You're on your way to a hospital."

He gave her a strange look. One she'd never seen on his face before.

"Sid?"

"Yes, everything's fine," came the voice from his chapped lips.

“You know, as long as I can remember, I’ve been afraid of fire. Now I’ve been right next to it and survived. It can’t do anything to me anymore. *He* can’t do anything to me anymore.”

Sue hid her unease as best she could. Her friend was talking nonsense. His mind had been addled by the heat. Hopefully it was only temporary.

“Relax!” She stroked his hair. He got goosebumps and twisted his face in anguish. “You’re a hero! You’ve done your part for the future.”

Sid shook his head. “I’ve only just begun. I’ve learned something, Sue. You can’t give in to fear. You have to look it in the eye. And that’s what I’m going to do.”

Sue had an ominous feeling. He couldn’t leave now, not while he didn’t have himself under control mentally. Sue clutched onto Sid as firmly as his condition allowed. “Sid, don’t do it. Stay here with me.”

“No, you’ll stay with me!”

Sue saw sparks dancing around him. Huang Chao let out a loud scream. She wanted to say something to the colonel, to reassure him somehow, but the helicopter’s interior vanished from sight.

8.

July 12, 2036

To this day, the Australian outback remained one of the most untouched regions of Earth. There were no precious metals, coal, or anything else worth destroying it for. Instead, there was pure, unfiltered nature, filled with marsupials, crocodiles, ferns, and ancient grasses that didn't exist on any other continent. Large parts of the outback were under conservation.

For his first few steps, Reginald Bull felt pretty much at home, but then he found himself considering which ancient creatures he might encounter there. Venomous snakes and other reptiles, birds of prey...

He instinctively picked up the pace, but this set some stones rolling. He cursed at himself. In training, he'd learned better than that. He recalled what he'd been taught about approaching a target in unknown terrain.

Crouching, always using the shadows of bushes and trees, he moved onward. Before taking each step, he assured himself that he wasn't about to jostle wood, stones, or something else that would make noise. After a while, he even found it fun, sneaking forward like a hunter-gatherer of old. Alas, his bedraggled body wasn't capable of silent movement, lying flat and resting only on the tips of his fingers and toes as he'd seen in old films and books. Besides, he wasn't traveling through the savannas of the Midwest, just a really stony hillside leading down into a valley.

No doubt there were scorpions too.

As he reached the uppermost way into the settlement, Bull finally had a clear view of it for the first time. It was a small town with at most a few hundred or a few thousand inhabitants, whose houses nestled close together in the valley and its edges and followed the course of the hill. The town sign was painted in black on a cracked, ancient board. For just a moment, Bull wondered why they hadn't put up a metal sign.

“Kitty Valley”—the valley of kitty, or Kitty’s valley, depending on how you understood the “Kitty” part. Bull assumed it was a name of Scottish or Irish origin. He stopped at the sign and looked at it from the other side. The red lines there had to be the roads, and the names on them the towns each one led to. It was all so faded as to be barely legible.

Okay, thought Bull. *I came from up there, but how did I get here in the first place? Cross-country?*

The people here would bombard him with questions, since he’d stand out for his American accent. He was definitely a foreigner, not a local.

Bull kept going. With every step, he weaved a few more threads into his tale. By the time he reached the first houses, it was almost complete.

On the main road, he spotted tavern signs from a distance. The Seven Oaks Pub and Gondawaigh Tavern; it all sounded quite British. There was also the Beast of Harlane.

Bull opted for the pub. He associated a tavern more with wine, and the Beast of Harlane with exotic dishes.

When he entered, an empty room stretched before him. On the bar, which had been polished to a sheen, there were two bells, the left one engraved with the word “Ale” and the right with “Porter.” Since Bull wasn’t interested in a drink with high alcohol content, he rang the “Ale” bell.

“Be right with you!” came a voice from a room behind the bar, presumably the kitchen. Three minutes later, a rather fat old man shuffled through the door and presented him with a full glass.

“Foreigners get the first beer free,” he grunted. “You are foreign, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. My car broke down up in the hills. There must be a workshop somewhere around here, right?”

“Not just one.”

The owner—Bull was pretty convinced that only the owner would be allowed to have a layer of dirt two centimeters thick under each fingernail—gave him the names and addresses of three workshops. As Bull drank his ale, the man asked about all kinds of irrelevant details, such as how cold it was up in the hills.

Bull put on the most serious face he could muster and replied, “When you’re thirty meters off the ground, it’s only seven degrees.”

The dirty old slob sniffled. The sound gave Bull goosebumps.

“I’ll come and say hi on the way back,” he promised, then he emptied his glass and went to the door. The landlord shuffled forward and held it open for him.

As he exited, Bull took a last noseful of air and tried to analyze the pub’s scent. It came closest to a mixture of spilled beer, cigar fumes, and rancid oil. Adding in the smell of the old man’s sweat, it easily came close to a suffocation risk.

Bull sauntered down the street, taking it slow on purpose so that observers would believe he was a casually jovial man who had accidentally had a breakdown. He only hoped that the workshop was less dire than the pub. What the hell had given him the idea that a small town like this might have good beer or good replacement parts?

“I shouldn’t get myself down,” he murmured.

He cast a look over his shoulder. The landlord was still standing in the doorway and watching him go.

Well, thought Bull, *maybe he’s just watching how I walk.* Some people did that as a way to read into other people’s characters. Or maybe the filthy man was just taking a look at his clothes and trying to figure out where the visitor came from. He’d have trouble gleaning much from this mixture of underwear and jumpsuit, though. Still, there wasn’t exactly anything wrong with the people of Kitty Valley looking so closely at visitors.

After three blocks, he turned onto a side street and found the recommended workshop in a rear courtyard. The two men holding sizable wrenches gave the impression that large trucks were serviced and repaired here from time to time. Bull struck up a conversation with them, as was the customary way of making first contact. The men spoke about the weather, the state of the world, and taxes, and eventually, Bull gestured towards the street.

He needed a vehicle and a few unconventional things for his broken-down truck: oxygen cylinders, a welding machine, hammers, bolt cutters, all kinds of screws, at least thirty meters of plastic tubing, and a hundred or so twenty-inch pipe clamps. This was actually far more stuff than he needed, but Bull wanted to make sure that no one wondered about an oddly specific selection of parts and tools.

“No problem, mate,” said one of the two men. “We’ve got it all here. Or we can get hold of it. We’ll need about an hour to get it all together. You can wait in the pub across the road.”

The other one nodded.

Bull went into the pub, which was appetizingly named the Bloody Shark. The two auto mechanics had talked pretty big. Well, he'd soon see what they could pull together. He didn't doubt that he'd get the welding gear. In remote places, they often made use of a cutting torch and a welder instead of getting replacement parts. In an emergency, specialists like this even welded onto rust so the car would at least hold together as far as the next city.

A city. Bull recalled that there was only one city on the entire west coast: Perth, way down in the southwest. The spider would have to fly at least to there. With a little luck and the right parts, he'd even be able to give it a new steel frame.

Bull took a seat at one of the tables in the back and chatted with the barkeep a little. Michael O'Banyon, the man was called. He asked Bull for a little patience and collected the other guests' payments. Bull noticed that some were paying even though they'd only just started to eat.

"The lunch breaks here are pretty short," O'Banyon told him with a light shrug. "So, what are you after?"

Bull's stomach had been growling for a while. Since the day before, in fact, when they'd gnawed on nutrition bars in the middle of the South China Sea. He ordered a typical trucker meal: T-bone steak with a fried egg, french fries, and a beer. After the long flight over the open ocean, he was unbelievably hungry, though the tension of the last few hours had distracted him from it. The steak was ready pretty quickly, and the egg too, while the fries were already ready and waiting in the fryer, dripping lazily. The beer was neither an ale nor a porter.

Holy smokes! thought Bull when he saw the wonderful head swelling over the edge of the glass. It was a European beer on draft, and it tasted like seventh heaven.

The food was just as delicious. The steak was slightly pink, the fried egg cooked through but without drying out the yolk. The fries were really crispy, and they didn't smell of old fryer oil, as you sometimes found at joints on the side of the highway. Bull thought of Rhodan, who was waiting for him up in the hills. Whatever happened, he had to bring his friend some of this delicious food.

The barkeep cast frequent searching glances at him, despite being deeply immersed in settling checks.

"A truly top-tier meal," said Bull.

“Cheers, mate! We get a lot of praise for our cooking. Some even say it would make the perfect last meal.”

“I can’t say I disagree with that.”

He ate at a leisurely pace, occasionally glancing out through the window at the drive leading to the workshop. A pickup truck kept driving off and coming back; the two men were evidently bringing over the goods he’d ordered.

Suddenly, two heads appeared at the window, then a third. Some men were staring at him. At first Bull thought they were checking for any free tables, but then he realized they were focused directly on him.

“I guess word’s gotten around that there’s a foreigner in town,” he said to the barkeep. “Good thing ‘High Noon’ has been and gone.”

The barkeep got the reference and burst out laughing. “Or what a shame.”

Bull drank his second beer and paid up. “I might need to stay the night. Do you have a free room?”

“’Fraid not. The motels are on the main road. All you can get at my place is a drink and a good meal.”

Bull left and crossed the street. The gate leading into the rear courtyard was shut, and no sound came from the workshop. He tried the gate and found it bolted, not just closed.

“Hello?” he called. “How’s it going with my order?”

Silence. Out of nowhere, the whole community seemed to have died out. The general noise of people chatting, cars driving, machines running, and dogs barking was gone, as if someone had turned the volume down or pumped the air out or something.

Bull turned around. He wouldn’t have been surprised to see the spherical Arkonide ship before him right now. Instead, a group of eight men was approaching him, all of them big and square-built.

“That’s one of those traitors!” one of them called at the top of his voice, waving a piece of paper. It was a printout of a photo of the *Stardust*’s crew taken before the Moon launch. “Get him!”

Damn interconnected planet! Nothing wittier occurred to Bull in the moment. He turned around and rushed along the street past a few stunned rubberneckers. More men approached from the direction of the main road and blocked his path.

The only way out is through! he thought, panic rising. He used his fists to knock the first two or three out of the way. Then he ran

against the wall of people and came to a standstill.

"Let me pass! You have no right to—"

A dozen hands clawed at his shirt and pants. From behind, someone snatched at his hair.

"Old Peckinpah's eyesight is better than he sometimes pretends," said one of them. "He watched them fly in, carried by one of those monsters. A spider-legged creature as big as my workshop."

Bull recognized the voice. It was one of the mechanics he'd spoken to. "Guys, what do you want from me?" Bull asked.

"On the full moon, they turn into monsters!" cried a young guy with a shrill voice. "I saw it in a movie."

Reginald Bull felt like he was in the *wrong* movie. "I'm a human like any other. And the aliens you've seen on TV are Arkonides. They look just like us."

"By day, that's how they look. At night, they transform!" the young man screeched. "Burn them!"

"Yeah, burn them!" hollered the mob.

As calmly as possible, Bull said, "Take the time to go up the hill and look. You'll soon see it's not a monster, just a vehicle made of metal."

The men gawked at him as if someone or something had switched off their brains. What he'd said didn't fit into their delusion, so they ignored it.

They dragged Bull off down the main road and into an alley that opened up into the village square. In the center, a lamppost loomed. Around it, the residents had piled up stacks of tires. On one stack stood Perry Rhodan, his back tied to the lamppost. His facial expression looked contrite.

"Finally," said Rhodan. "I was getting really bored without you."

"Did they find you with the *Phoenix*?"

"Yeah. They've already checked over it."

"Then they know it's not a monster."

"Of course!"

"Then what's with all this bullshit?"

"You'll have to ask them. They weren't in the mood to open up to me."

They dragged Bull up onto the pile next to Rhodan. He doled out kicks and punches, even knocking some of them over. However,

he couldn't put up enough of a fight in the face of these numbers.

Once he was tightly bound, the mechanics opened gas cans and poured the gasoline over the tires. He noticed the barkeep among those standing around.

"Say, doesn't it feel like kind of a waste?" Bull grumbled as he inconspicuously pressed his hands flat against the pole and tried to see if he could pull them out of the rope. That, too, he had learned in some of his army training. *About time I made use of that,* he thought angrily. "All that delicious food given to a dead man."

O'Banyon showed a crooked smirk. "In heaven, I'll be repaid a thousandfold."

So that's what this is all about, Bull thought. *They're religious zealots who haven't noticed it's a new millennium yet.*

Matches lit up and flew against the tires. The gasoline caught fire. Suddenly, it was very hot, and a horrible stench was spreading.

Rhodan's face jerked around to look directly at Bull. "Wait," he half-whispered. "I've already untied myself. We just have to wait it out a little. Do you see the two guys with the pistols? We'll go for them."

"Great."

The tires burned. Black fumes rose up. Bull waited until they hid all view of the surrounding people, then tugged his arms out of the ropes as quickly as he could and brushed the loosened ropes downward. From a small pocket right below his belt, he pulled out his small all-purpose army knife. After cutting through the ropes, he looked over at Rhodan.

"On three," said the latter, smiling humorlessly.

A sharp gust of wind blew in, and the flames surged up in front of them. Bull felt a firm grip on his arms, and suddenly the firearms were gone and he was staring at a wall instead. It looked like the lit-up interior of a truck.

There was no sign of the light pole or the tires anymore. Only the stench remained.

"You almost eluded me," said a friendly voice. "Now hold on tight, please!"

Bull instinctively grasped for the loop dangling in front of his face. A jerk almost pulled him and Rhodan off their feet as the large truck's rumbling turned into a thundering.

Bull was practically deafened for a moment. He stared at the dark-skinned man who had pulled them out of their funeral pyre.

Did I dream all that?

They were clearly standing in the cargo area of a truck now. The cargo further forward was swaying precariously.

"Don't worry, the boxes are tied down well." The man smirked and showed a radiant set of flawless white teeth.

The vehicle moved at a breakneck pace. It was a struggle for Bull to keep his balance.

The loop hung from one of the crossbars of the truck's fittings and was attached to it with a knot that easily slackened.

"Wh... What did you do with us?" Bull asked, taken aback. "How did we get here so quickly?"

"It was teleportation," the man replied. "Would you allow me to introduce myself? My name is Ras Tschubai."

"Teleportation. Huh. You have supernatural powers?"

"You could call it that, yes."

Bull turned to Rhodan. "Okay, Perry. I'm ready for the funny farm."

A light hint of an "I could have told you that!" smile played at the corners of Rhodan's mouth. It drove Bull half crazy.

"We'll know more in a minute, Reg."

The truck veered around a curve. The cargo wobbled. A clattering sounded somewhere, as if a box had fallen down. Bull involuntarily drew his head back. The vehicle braked sharply, left the road, and rumbled along a dirt track. Shortly after that, it came to a stop.

"All right," came a voice from the driver's cab. "We should be far enough away."

A door slammed. Moments later, the latch to the cargo area was squeezed, and the wing doors swung open. Daylight flooded in.

Ras Tschubai helped them get out. An old man with a hunched back and sparse hair stood before them. He offered each of the two astronauts his hand in turn.

"You can't imagine how happy I am to finally meet you."

"Thank you for rescuing us," said Rhodan. "How on earth did you find us?"

"It wasn't easy, I'll admit. We didn't learn about your escape from Terrania until hours later. Then we soon hit upon the idea that you might fly to Australia. From there, we searched. Ras Tschubai discovered you, or your vehicle at least, south of Borneo, then not far from the Australian mainland. He watched you from a distance.

He almost intervened with the emergency landing, in fact, but then he saw that it wasn't necessary. Once we knew where you were, it was a simple matter for me to rent a truck. Originally, I envisioned transporting your vehicle with it, but then Ras got closer and saw that it was far too big for any normal truck."

The old man bent down slightly and handed a business card to Rhodan.

Bull glanced at it. "Homer G. Adams" was written on it, and "General Cosmic Company," which was evidently the name of his firm. It sounded very, very futuristic, Bull felt—in stark contrast to this weird business card with its old-fashioned design.

His vigilant gaze on the old man, Bull asked dryly, "What does your company sell?"

"Hope!" Adams replied.

"Wonderful!" Bull didn't know if he should laugh or cry. "Just what we're in urgent need of right now. By the bucketload, frankly. And how exactly do you sell hope?"

"The way it's been done since the dawn of time. With the help of a few friends."

"We could make use of those too, actually. Without you and Mr. Tschubai, we'd have been up a creek without a paddle. We might have been able to get away, but we'd barely have stood a chance against the whole town."

Bull turned to Tschubai.

"Not to intrude, but you wouldn't mind giving a quick demonstration of this gift, would you? Here and now?"

"No problem. See that large rock up there? It towers roughly ten meters from the landscape. Soon you'll be able to enjoy the view from up there."

Tschubai grabbed Bull by the arm. Bull blinked just once, then he was standing on top of the rock. He looked down past his feet and saw all the dirt clustered around the rock. Then he looked forward and saw the truck and the other two men.

In a flash, he was back again. Rhodan's turn was next, and last of all even Adams got to enjoy the view of the landscape.

"It's a remarkable gift," said the boss of the General Cosmic Company.

"A fluke of nature?"

"Who knows, Mr. Rhodan? Presumably it was always there, but we're only now becoming conscious of it for the first time."

9.

The Past

Thora da Zoltral felt her senses slipping away. The hulking silhouette loomed over her threateningly. The tentacles held her on the ground, while another seemed to wrap around her neck and squeezed the air out of her.

A thought shot through her head. *I messed up. I made one mistake after another.*

She never should have embarked on the reconnaissance flight in this critical situation. Then, when they were over Venus, the three Arkonides should never have flown in sync and so close to one another. As commander, the responsibility was all hers. She had neglected important rules for recon of an alien solar system.

Two of the being's extremities grabbed her and threw her onto her stomach. The monstrosity started pulling off her supply pack.

Her vision finally turned black. She no longer had the energy to fight. She yearned for unconsciousness and only hoped she wouldn't consciously experience this thing taking off her helmet and delighting in her death by asphyxiation. The quiet sound of the screw cap sounded overloud in her ears. Her senses were being overstimulated by the poison gas. She was choking.

She dedicated her last thought to Crest, who was stuck on Earth at the mercy of the humans' whims. Perry Rhodan wouldn't keep the Arkonide scientist safe for long, she was sure of that. But at least Crest would live a little longer than Thora, who had so shamefully left him in the lurch.

Was that any thanks for the love and care Crest had raised her with? She should never have left him in the hands of Rhodan and the Terrans. With this last breath of her life, she cursed herself for what she had done.

The stench of sulfur lessened. Thora didn't pass out. Oxygen streamed into her helmet. She tried to draw breath but only partly managed it. Her lungs had tensed up; she needed a dozen breaths

before the muscle tissue had relaxed enough for her to breathe deeply again.

My attacker is saving me?

Her vision was still hazy. She saw vague motions through her visor, and heard a mumbling, presumably the being's voice. When would the translator finally kick in?

The tentacles pulled her up onto her feet. She could see no one there, however. She spun around in a circle. "I'm hallucinating!"

As her vision grew clearer, she realized her visor was completely obscured. It looked like a film of dirt. Something worm-like slid across the coating, and now she had a blurry view of the figure standing in front of her.

"The tear has been sealed, and the air purification system is now fully enclosed," the Positronic reported. "Your circulation has stabilized."

Liquid poured over the helmet visor and cleaned it. Beyond the visor of her helmet, she saw what looked like a mirror image.

The face wasn't right, however. It wasn't her own. In fact, this mirror image was wrong in all sorts of ways. The alien seemed to be a morpher, a mysterious shape-changer. Only, it had difficulty recreating the noble face of an Arkonide.

Thora's thoughts were still sluggish. As she stretched out her arms defensively and wondered why the Positronic wasn't doing anything, her senses cleared up more and more. Suddenly, she recognized the worried face looking back at her.

"Tamika!"

Her eyes were alert. "You recognize me. That's good. We have to hurry!"

The voice sounded muffled from Tamika's helmet. The fog clouds carried sound, but not well enough. It made communication difficult. Thora and Tamika rested their helmets against each other.

"You didn't make it easy," said the young woman. "You were damn quick. It took a lot of effort to follow the traces of oxygen from your defective suit."

"The tear in the backpack," Thora said dully.

"Your suit doesn't have a supply of sealant. It's long overdue for servicing."

Were her ears deceiving her, or did she hear something like reproach in Tamika's words? Stunned, Thora looked at the young Arkonide. She no longer had any of the lethargy and stupor Thora

had observed in her on board the *Aetron*. It was like she'd never grown apathetic through addiction to the games.

"The com units are still nonfunctional," Tamika reported. "There must be a jammer somewhere. Let's move on as quickly as possible. The crash site is this way. Together, we might be able to achieve more." She gestured to the right.

"No," Thora shook her head. "The fault lines on the ground lead to the wreckage."

The readings from their two suits, made from different positions during or shortly after the crash, provided data that allowed the Positronics to perform a fairly accurate triangulation.

They shared their data acoustically, using their helmets as a sounding board. The combination gave them coordinates that represented the wreck's position with a relatively high degree of certainty.

Then they established a route that ran in accordance with the geometric structure of the parquet, following the sides of a triangle. Half an hour forward, then twenty minutes to the right. It sounded logical enough, but they were far from sure. If nothing else, at least it clearly delineated their search area.

In single file, they went along the lines on the ground. Thora let the younger space traveler take the lead. "Have you made contact with Quiniu?" she inquired.

"No. There are no indications of a second crash, if that's what you mean."

The sober statement fostered, at least a little, the hope that a search party might soon appear above Venus. Before then, they'd have to find the defense system and jammer and disable them.

"You're going rather quickly, Tamika!"

"Haste is imperative. The reconnaissance ship is burning. Ideally, I'll be able to save the data before the storage melts."

"What data?"

Tamika didn't provide any clarity, and Thora wasn't interested in repeating the question. That would have positioned her beneath the young woman. If someone had to ask questions all the time, it often meant they couldn't think for themselves. As such, she wasn't surprised that Tamika didn't give her an answer. It demonstrated her respect for Thora's rank and background.

Once they had left the relevant distance behind them, the Positronics gave the signal. "Turn ninety degrees to the right."

Thora took some time to check over her air supply using the Positronic. The leak had lost her more than half a day's worth of air. With the air she'd used up normally, it came to a whole day. She only had four days left.

The two Arkonides walked for ten minutes before coming across the first pieces of the ship. Charred components led the way to the crash site. Shortly after that, the still-smoking wreckage materialized through the fog. It was broken into three pieces, but the cockpit appeared to be largely intact. Its nose was pointing into the sky as if to show the two women the direction of home.

Tamika walked with singular purpose to the cockpit. She smoothly opened the paneling and activated the emergency power supply for the functionality check.

"Just before the instruments gave out, the position of the energy cannon was localized and saved," she said. "With a little luck..."

Luck subjected them to a trial of patience. After an hour, Tamika still had no success to report.

Thora spent the waiting time examining the rubble, especially the area where the energy beam had struck the vehicle. She found a finger-width hole through which the energy had penetrated to the interior. The destruction had unfolded only afterwards. The left half of the ship had flown off and now lay somewhere in the fog that encompassed everything. On the whole, the rest of the ship had survived, with the exception of pieces affected during the crash, whether ripped off due to the inertia or burned up.

With the help of their suits' instruments, she investigated the residual traces of the beam's radiation. It was an inefficiently modulated energy beam that had hit the ship; the Positronic confirmed the provisional analysis. Measured by Arkonide standards, Thora would have deemed the cannon obsolete.

In other words, the unknown enemy was using outdated weaponry to attack Arkonides. That was interesting.

Thora returned to the cockpit. "Well?"

Tamika hadn't made much progress. "The cable connections and plug couplings are torn. I have to bypass them to get to the data storage."

It was the only available straw for them to grasp at. If they found the artillery base that had shot at their ship, there was a narrow chance for them to survive on Venus. Stations like that

tended to have weapon control systems, command centers, automatic control units, and usually accommodation for assigned task forces as well. Water, food, air supplies—all that was among the most crucial equipment they could expect to find. The station's proprietors weren't necessarily carbon dioxide breathers. They could be hydrogen or oxygen breathers. Or even robots.

Thora helped Tamika, and together they managed to temporarily connect up the data lines and link them to the two battledresses' systems. The Positronics read the data, which revealed a full set of coordinates, which they added to the already compiled environmental coordinate system.

"Let's go!" said Tamika.

They took one last look at the smoldering wreckage of the reconnaissance ship before it disappeared into the fog and the darkness after a few meters. As they walked on in silence, Thora da Zoltral thought of Perry Rhodan, the Terran. His Moon landing hadn't gone much better than this. With his ship no longer capable of flight, he'd been dependent on outside help, just as they were now on Venus. And who could be sure they wouldn't meet intelligent life that acted along the same lines and refused to help at first?

Or intelligence on par with them?

Thora addressed the Positronic. "If the two com units start working again and we connect them together, would the expanded range be enough to send a distress call?"

"No, Commander. The range of a standard com transmitter is too short, and close to one hundred percent of the waves are reflected."

"A station that can jam com waves undoubtedly has a working transmitter," said Tamika. "Perhaps even a powerful hypercom system. Then we can request help from Arkon."

"Yes...of course," Thora replied. She hoped her hesitation didn't make Tamika suspicious. Arkon was too far away for direct hypercom contact. And even if they could reach a relay station, she couldn't request any help from Arkon. But she couldn't tell the young woman the reason for that.

The two women fumbled their way through the fog for two hours, then a third. The Positronic continually recalculated the distance traveled and checked the direction and angle against parquet, correcting them several times along the way.

The station had to be very close by, in a radius of one to two kilometers at most. With their current visibility of about five meters, they estimated that this search would take many times as long as the search for the wreck.

"We'll go in opposite directions and approach the center in a spiral going inwards," said Thora. "The Positronics will set the two courses and the intersection points between them, where we'll wait for each other to share any information."

The Positronics took only a few seconds to calculate the relevant plan of action, and the two Arkonides set out right away.

Thora put in extra effort to breathe shallowly to save oxygen. She kept finding herself sniffing to check for traces of stinging gas. The suit was holding fast, at least for now, as she followed her ponderous course along the longest and outermost part of the route. When they reached the first intersection point, the diffuse light beam of a second suit appeared out of the darkness.

"Nothing," she heard Tamika say.

"Nothing," Thora replied, already walking past her on the way to the second meeting point.

She still saw nothing along the narrowing path. Slowly the angles between her path and the straight lines of the parquet grew steeper, the distances between the intersection points shorter.

At the fifth point of intersection, there was no sign of Tamika. Thora waited quite a while and was about to move on when the young Arkonide finally came into view.

"It was only an obstacle. Not a discovery."

"Nothing from my side either."

They went on their way to the next intersection, and the next. Thora took little excursions from the designated path, taking her up to ten meters away. If she was lucky, she'd find some signs—traces of vehicles or life-forms, or even just a little stone dust ground under caterpillar tracks.

At the eighth intersection, they both arrived simultaneously.

"It can't be far," said Thora, having pushed her helmet against Tamika's. "Whichever of us finds something first should return here. The other should keep going until the center of the spiral, then come back."

"Understood!"

They split up again and continued along the narrow circle. The curves became ever tighter, and eventually Thora reached the point

where the two routes met each other, and she was practically turning on the spot. When Tamika didn't arrive, Thora drew the logical conclusion: she had found something.

Thora turned and went back, more slowly and cautiously than before. At the meeting point, Tamika waited in the fog.

"There's an airlock hatch," the Arkonide reported.

Thora took a deep breath. A simple airlock mechanism would present no problem for the battledress.

Tamika didn't say anything further. On tiptoes, Thora followed the young woman. The airlock was a little way off from the spiral path. A continuous air flow displaced the fog in the immediate vicinity. Thora spotted a fan next to the gate, presumably the exhaust from an air conditioning system. This was what was generating the air flow.

She cautiously approached the gate, which measured roughly four by four meters and was framed by steel plates. Thora kept an eye out for security cameras but saw none. That didn't mean anything; such devices could be too small for the Arkonide's eyes to see. After a brief search, she discovered that one of the steel plates was, in fact, a code-entry keypad designed to blend in with the others.

Next to that, she found a message in ancient Arkonide letters. Thora's breath caught in her throat. "This... This can't be! Look at this! It's completely impossible!"

Strangely, she didn't know the words or their meaning, but this was very clearly Arkonide text.

Tamika was just as baffled. Thora consulted the Positronic, but it didn't help them any further. The two women could have used Crest right then, with his nearly endless knowledge and experience.

"But if Arkonides had already been to this solar system and set up a base here, that would have been known," said Tamika.

Thora agreed with her. "If there's secret data about such a visit, it will be present in the *Aetron*'s databanks and kept under lock and key."

They needed a connection back to the research ship, and to Crest, as soon as possible.

Thora looked at the well-disguised keypad. It clearly served for entering a key code and was geared towards Arkonide fingers. Given the number of keys, there were millions of possibilities. Thora decided on the easiest one. She opened one of the pockets on

the left leg of her battledress and pulled out a narrow rod. She activated it with a few hand motions and shoved it between the keys. Sometimes the most primitive methods were the most effective.

"Back!"

Sparks flew; moments later, the melting began. The device transformed into a clump. Thin smoke rose up. Where the two halves of the hatch met, a narrow gap opened up.

Together, the two women slid the halves a little farther out. Inside the airlock, red lamps glowed—the emergency lighting. In Thora's helmet receiver, a rusty computer voice gurgled something incomprehensible.

"The com units are working again," the Positronic superfluously confirmed.

Thora looked across the airlock. There were two hand winches, one at the front and one at the back, used for manually opening and closing the hatches. On the left wall, small and unimposing, sat a portable projector.

Tamika was already standing at the front-hand winch and closing the outer bulkhead.

"Careful!" said Thora. "If this thing is old, it might explode." She pressed the activation button. There was a quiet humming; the Positronic recognized the device, marking it as an air pump. It was extracting the Venusian atmosphere and flooding the airlock with the customary mixture of oxygen and nitrogen.

Tamika carried on cranking. A light glowed beyond the inner hatch. A ramp led downward at a fairly steep angle.

Thora pulled out her hand beamer and disabled the safety. The two women began their descent.

10.

July 11, 2036

They were on their own. Their agreement with Rhodan and Bull still applied, though. Hold position, seamlessly blend in among the refugees in Terrania, and keep out of the soldiers' way as long as possible.

By all appearances, the *Phoenix* had managed to escape from the city's surroundings. How long Rhodan and Bull could continue their flight remained uncertain.

"There are too many of them," said Nyssen after a lengthy glance outside. "Thousands of armed soldiers, and more of them arriving all the time."

The four astronauts had already noticed this out on the street. Ever more soldiers were infiltrating the city. Larger groups were going through each building, and every newly arriving group searched through them again.

"We can't stay here!" said Darya Morozova after a similar look through the window. "We'll all split up. Regular meetings every two hours at building thirty-four."

They nodded to one another and left the building one at a time about ten minutes apart. Darya left last. All kinds of stray items lay in the street, probably dropped by the fleeing people. She bent down and picked up a couple. A pair of sunglasses and a hat. Morozova decided it was fate and put both of them on.

"Perfect disguise," she said, twisting her face into a hint of a smile.

A long convoy of army trucks approached along the hills. Watching, she saw them split into smaller convoys that drove into the city on different streets. The trucks rolled past the paramedics at work everywhere; the wounded were being treated and hopefully taken to nearby field hospitals, while the dead were being retrieved.

This was actually an aid convoy. Morozova saw two heavy trucks stopping between two buildings. All around stood groups of

refugees, watching the soldiers. When the latter pulled down the covering and unloaded food, water, and hygiene products, the people slowly drew closer. The soldiers began to distribute the goods.

"Now that, I don't understand," the cosmonaut said to herself. "Why are they suddenly interested in the people staying here and being healthy?"

Morozova saw groups of three to four Chinese soldiers who lingered in the background and watched the streets and plazas from doorways or the shadows of buildings. They were probably looking to see exactly who went to the distribution points. They were clearly searching for four specific people.

The cosmonaut took a deep breath and walked on as if none of this mattered to her. The soldiers paid her no mind.

Another convoy of trucks made its way into the city and drove towards the center. Among them, she saw a flatbed truck with an excavator and another with a long pole lying on it. The long metal stick had rollers that glimmered in the sun, and a rope attached. Evidently, it was a flagpole. What was going on here?

She followed the convoy behind a group of people just as curious as she was, inconspicuously joining up with them. The convoy reached the center of the improvised city, where the Arkonide machines had left a large square free of buildings.

In the middle of the square, the soldiers unloaded the excavator, which promptly began digging up a hole. More and more rubberneckers came to watch, many of them with plastic bottles full of water. The soldiers didn't stop the people from approaching but did hold them back when they came too close.

The cosmonaut retreated into one of the half-finished buildings on the edge of the square. No one took any notice of her. The people around were staring at the digger and the steadily deepening hole as if bewitched.

She hurried up the staircase to the next floor to get a better view. With quick steps, she went over to the window hole; the window itself was still missing.

Darya watched as a group of officers gathered in the background. "They're going to hoist a flag," she said in realization. "And it certainly won't be the flag of the free state of Terrania."

She heard footsteps in the rear of the apartment and darted over to the doorway leading to the corridor, standing behind the

corner. Quick as a flash, she balled her hand and stretched out her arm.

The approaching soldier ran right into it, the fist hitting his forehead. That same moment, she wrested his automatic rifle from him with her right hand. Then she knocked him unconscious with it.

She looked over the firearm. It was a Chinese model that she wasn't familiar with, but she knew her way around a weapon. Great Russia was adamant that all its children pass a military-esque training regime as early as their school days.

"You know what you have to do, right, Darya?" she asked herself, then nodded. She had to set an example for the people. That was the only thing that could spark an uprising against the soldiers.

General Bai Jun had to die. A single well-aimed shot would suffice.

A few hundred soldiers had been deployed and were standing in blocks. Morozova estimated that three or four companies had occupied the square. An all-terrain vehicle drove into position; she saw a handful of officers clustered around a man she recognized as Bai Jun.

An adjutant stood next to the pole, the Chinese national flag over his arms. A second stood ready to attach the flag.

Through narrowed eyes, the Russian watched as the driver opened the vehicle's doors wide, pressed a button, and briefly saluted. The first notes of the Chinese national anthem sounded from some speakers. The soldier took the flag's strings and attached it to the rings on the rope. Then he pulled on the rope. Slowly, the flag unfurled and traveled up the mast.

More and more curious onlookers arrived, streaming out of the streets and buildings to watch the ceremony, many of them still chewing. Morozova released the safety catch and readied the weapon. All her nerves vanished. All she saw was the general's head in the scope, tilting up little by little as his eyes followed the flag's motion.

Morozova knew that she'd have no chance after firing the shot. It was clear to her that her act would also have consequences for her three comrades if they were discovered.

Nonetheless, someone had to do it. Otherwise the dream of Terrania was no more.

Just then, a voice behind her said in English, "Don't do it,

Darya."

She whipped around. A man and woman stood in the entrance; both looked like Europeans or Americans. The man's dirty blond hair was cut short. As absurd as the thought was, she couldn't help finding him likeable. He had something warmhearted about him that touched her. The woman beside him had dark hair and was wiry like an athlete.

They were unarmed.

"Please, don't do it, Darya," the man repeated. "At least not before you've listened to what I have to say."

"How do you know what I want to do?" She set aside her questions about how the man knew her name and how he'd found her. She aimed the weapon at his chest.

"You're going to kill General Bai Jun."

How did he know? Pure logic, of course. If she was going to shoot someone, of course it would be the general, not some random officer.

"How does he know? Pure logic, of course," the foreigner repeated. "If I'm going to shoot someone, of course it'll be the general, not some random officer."

Her finger curled around the trigger. She couldn't let herself be thrown off balance. She only had this one chance.

"You only have this one chance."

Darya gripped the weapon more tightly. "Who are you?"

"John Marshall. I can read your thoughts. You're Darya. Darya Morozova. Former Great Russian cosmonaut. Saved from suffocation on the Moon by Reginald Bull, after which you switched to Rhodan's side."

Darya's mind raced. This was impossible!

"It's not impossible," said John Marshall. "Only difficult to imagine." He turned to the woman next to him. "Anne, would you be so kind?"

The woman shut her eyes, and in the next moment an invisible hand yanked the weapon out of the cosmonaut's. It rammed against the wall, bending the barrel. Instead of falling to the ground, though, the weapon bounced back like a rubber ball. It floated in the middle of the room at eye level, and then suddenly the barrel tied itself into a knot as if it were made of plastic.

"But…that's… It can't be…" All Morozova could manage were halting half-sentences.

“It will have to be,” said John Marshall. “General Bai Jun has sided with Perry Rhodan, just like you. The general cannot die!”

11.

July 13, 2036

"What is the Arkonide thinking right now?" Clifford Monterny asked his companion.

They were sitting in a box above the Supreme Court's courtroom that wasn't visible from the outside. No one knew that they were there watching the proceedings. Monterny was leaning forward to ensure that not one gesture or facial expression below escaped his notice.

"I'm sorry," replied Tatiana Michalovna, the telepath. Sweat beaded her forehead, showing that she was using her psychic ability. "I can't grasp hold of his thoughts. It's like there's a fog in the way."

Monterny had expected nothing else. She had only managed to delve into his mind once. It had been a few days earlier, while the Arkonide was under his authority. He had used that chance to put Crest under pressure. The ostensibly fragile Arkonide had proven himself to be exceptionally strong-willed, resisting both Monterny's gift and Michalovna's.

In one instance, however, they had broken through—and discovered what had led the Arkonides to Earth. What other secrets might Crest da Zoltral still be hiding?

"Close your eyes! Forget about everything around you."

Monterny gazed down into the courtroom and looked at the row of justices. They were sitting on a raised platform in front of the back wall, observing those present. Thanks to the telepath, he knew every last face, every individual life story with its highs and lows. All of them had done things that were punishable by the strictest measures of the United States legal system. If Monterny wanted to, he could have any of them put behind bars for a few years.

But trivial details like that didn't concern him. Not anymore.

He looked at Crest. The Arkonide appeared composed. And

ready to fight. In no way did he give the impression of a broken man.

"Are you getting through to him?" Monterny asked the telepath.

"No," she replied without opening her eyes. "It's... It's almost as if he's not alone. As if there's another mind protecting him."

That was nonsense, of course. But he didn't say that out loud. Tatiana Michalovna was doing everything she could. The two of them were the only ones who knew the Arkonide's secret. Crest da Zoltral had come to the Moon in search of eternal life.

But he would die on Earth. Stanley Drummond, the American president, had deemed it so. Elections were coming up in a few months. Drummond had to show decisiveness and put the world back in order for the voters. The president believed that Crest da Zoltral had no further value. The Arkonides' ship on the Moon had been destroyed; the *Stardust* too, and the *Stardust*'s landing site in the Gobi was occupied by the Chinese army. All that was left here was an old man who had caused a great deal of trouble and who wouldn't let anyone get anything else out of him. The justices would condemn him to death.

With a little luck, Rhodan and Bull would even attempt to free him. Then those traitors could be captured and put on trial as well. That was how the president saw things unfolding from here.

Clifford Monterny knew better. He turned his attention back to the courtroom. The chief justice confirmed the presence of all relevant parties. The prosecution was represented by three people, Jack Nesmith and two secretaries, and the defense by one.

"Who's the defense attorney?" Monterny asked. Until now, he hadn't paid the fellow any mind. Crest's judgment was predetermined anyway.

"William Tifflor," the telepath replied.

"I've heard that name before."

"He's a star lawyer. Specializes in hopeless cases."

"Then he's in the right place."

The justice gave the defense attorney the floor. William Tifflor proposed a motion for the defendant's handcuffs to be removed on humanitarian grounds and with a view to his age and state of health. Tifflor looked like he was in his mid-forties or early fifties. He was thin with short hair that was gray at the temples. He spoke quietly, like a man who was used to being listened to—and one who waited for the right moment to raise his voice.

The prosecution raised an objection: Crest was a flight risk.

"Your Honor! Members of the jury!" Tifflor replied. "How can he possibly be a flight risk when his flight vehicle has been destroyed by the powers of Planet Earth?"

The justice accepted this. A clerk took off Crest's handcuffs.

In the gallery where the media technicians and editors were sitting, animated discussion broke out. The chief justice demanded order.

Monterny looked at Michalovna. The telepath still had her eyes closed. He poured water from a carafe into a glass and passed it to her. "Here, have something to drink!"

She drained it in one gulp.

In the courtroom, the chief justice began the evidentiary hearing and asked the defendant the standard question. "How do you plead, guilty or not guilty?"

Crest rose to his feet. "Not guilty," he said calmly in English. "I didn't kill anyone."

The prosecution had the floor. He gave a detailed description of the circumstances that had led to the indictment. The defense attorney frequently interrupted him with doubts about certain statements, each of which led to a long, time-consuming argument.

Monterny watched with satisfaction. The Americans didn't want a short trial. Rhodan needed a chance to arrive on the scene.

The door to the box opened. It was Stanley Drummond himself.

"I'll be brief," said the president in place of a greeting. He and Monterny had known each other for years. Polite nothings were no longer needed between them. "How are the preparations going?"

"Swimmingly. Rhodan won't slip through our fingers."

"The landing site in the Gobi has finally fallen. The Chinese have broken through the last remaining resistance, if there was any."

"How do you know that?"

"The general secretary has just arrived on that pile of dust and earth that Rhodan calls Terrania. Huang Hai-Jie never takes any risks."

"The Chinese have Rhodan?"

"I don't believe so, no. Otherwise they'd be putting him on show like we are with Crest."

"For sure. Which means he got away. I'm hardly surprised, the crafty little bastard."

“It means I’m counting on you even more.”

Monterny nodded. “We’re all prepared. You just make sure the trial continues.”

“Everything’s going according to plan.”

Drummond left. Monterny listened for the footsteps to fade into the distance. “Did you manage to read his thoughts? Is he suspicious at all?”

“No. But we should be on our guard anyway. We’re getting too powerful for him. When this is over, he wants to get us out of the way.”

“He’ll only lose his own head in the process.” Monterny looked down at the courtroom again, at the Arkonide. “And we,” he whispered, “will live forever!”

12.

The Past

Without the Arkonide writing, it would have been a base just like any of the others Thora had visited in her life. And yet, the building had a touch of the uncanny, the incalculable.

Arkonides didn't build like this. A spherical shell arched above the two women's heads. When they reached the bottom of the ramp, they found themselves in front of an anti-grav shaft with a spiral staircase winding around it.

Looking forward and back for safety, Thora and Tamika moved towards the shaft. A bridge led to the opening. Thora carefully stepped onto it and drew nearer to the wall. She ran her gloved hand over the metal. The surface felt rough, the material dull; no comparison with the shining, smoothly burnished materials that Arkon used.

"What's that?" Tamika asked.

"It's not terconite, and it's not plastic. Some old type of metal. There's no way it can be of Arkonide origin."

Thora pulled a plastic strap out of a pocket on her suit and secured it to her hand beamer. She threw the weapon into the shaft, and it instantly fell down like a stone. She had to pull it back with a heavy tug on the strap before it made any noise bouncing against the shaft wall.

The anti-grav shaft was out of order, but the light still glowed inside it and along the staircase they were now descending. The steps were made for the feet of Arkonides and other humanoids.

Thora's cheeks were burning, as was her forehead. What kind of a situation had they gotten themselves into? And it was their own fault, not that of, say, the Terrans.

No, not all of us, she corrected herself. *I'm solely responsible for this.* What on Arkon had put her so off-balance that she'd made such a poor decision?

She hastily turned her attention back to her environment. A

soft, even humming of machines droned from the depths. The base was operational. But what was the light for? Robots didn't need any lighting. An infrared sensor was enough, or in the worst case a spotlight built into the robot's body.

"It's an automated base," Tamika said. "It came online when the two reconnaissance ships showed up. I'm sure it's only a matter of time before everything here goes back into sleep mode again."

"You're saying we should just wait?"

"That would be an option."

Thora was against it. They couldn't waste any time. The station's equipment could give them information about the second ship's whereabouts. If Quiniu Soptor had already returned to Earth's moon, their chances weren't so slim after all. Quiniu would check on the *Aetron* and find out what the distress call meant. She would also establish contact with Crest, who would be in charge of deciding everything that followed.

Please, star gods, let him still be alive!

Thora discovered a continuous, finger-wide gap between the staircase and the shaft wall—a possible indication of a rotating system. Only, why would a structure embedded in a planet's rocky surface ever need to rotate?

The spiral staircase led down almost endlessly into the depths. The Positronic had counted two hundred steps by the time they reached the first exit. Thora stepped onto the landing. The silhouette of a door was visible in the wall. She searched fruitlessly for a touch panel or other sensor that would open it. Instead, there was a raised area on the right-hand side that looked like something should be attached to it. When Thora touched it, she found she could slide it to the left. A small tremor ran through the door, which then opened slightly.

Thora peered through. Glaring light blinded her. She slid the door open a little more. Beyond it stretched a gallery, with the railing overlooking a giant hall full of robots. The two Arkonides recognized this sight from most of the Imperium's other bases and facilities. Here in this remote corner of the galaxy, the hall felt like an anachronism.

"This again looks unmistakably Arkonide to me," Tamika said quietly.

Thora replied with an emphatic gesture of negation. "There is absolutely no way! No Arkonide ships have ever flown into this

solar system before. Even if they have, there are no records of it. The Sol system is insignificant, irrelevant. Why would our forebears have established a base here?"

"Perhaps for the same reason we're here."

Thora's head whipped around when she heard Tamika's barbed observation. Only she and Crest knew about the true purpose of their expedition. The rest of the crew believed it was an ordinary research mission—and given their lack of interest in anything other than their games, none of them had expressed any doubt about that. Until now.

She took a probing look at Tamika. The young woman had changed. Not a trace of her earlier lethargy remained. It unsettled Thora, in a way. But in another way, it galvanized her. There was still hope for their people; Tamika's transformation proved it.

This thought petered out as Thora was faced with the droning from the far reaches of the hall. She let her gaze wander. Staircases placed at roughly equal intervals led from the gallery down into the hall. The two women took the nearest one; on the gallery they felt like sitting ducks.

As they descended the metal steps, Thora gained an overview of the room. The machines were organized into different zones, with rows of corridors in between that were as wide as boulevards. Smaller groups were organized within that in a chessboard-like fashion.

"The air is breathable," the Positronic reported. "You can open your helmet and conserve your own resources."

Thora declined. "Too dangerous," she said. "But by all means, you can switch to external intake."

"Instruction executed, Commander!"

It was stifling in the helmet for a few moments as the computer switched off the internal supply feed and began to take in air from the outside. That was safe enough by Thora's standards, since the Positronic was checking the air and warding off any poisonous substances.

The Positronic received com traffic that included encrypted machine language. The patterns were unclear, the encryption level extremely high.

"Meaning robots or soldiers are about to appear," the Arkonide concluded.

Even the most antiquated Positronic would have to have

noticed by now that someone had opened the airlock. From there, it was an obvious connection with the ship that had been shot down.

"Whoever we meet, right now, they're our enemy," Thora impressed upon Tamika. "Our ships have an encoded ID signal. Any Arkonide scanner would immediately recognize them as friendly vehicles. Which means we can't be dealing with members of the Grand Imperium."

Crouching, they crossed the empty space between the staircase and the first sector of machines. Hulking generators towered before them, connected to each other by massive coils with energy charges occasionally crackling lightly along them.

Thora tried to figure out the machines' purposes based on the energy emissions. She didn't succeed. The Positronic judged them to be energy converters, but they weren't working efficiently enough for that and were only operating in a very long-wave range.

The two women kept going, moving between these humps. They found mobile units that had been stored here long in the past; thick layers of dust had built up around their bases. Thora saw control elements that were no doubt designed for acoustic orders, and next to that, flat panels that looked like sensors.

There was a barrel robot measuring forty to fifty centimeters across; it was roughly a meter tall, and its lower edge looked like it had rusted through many years earlier, spilling some kind of outdated lubricant.

"It's oil," said Tamika, and Thora marveled at her knowing that. "It smells rancid."

Modern lubricants were purely synthetic rather than being made from fossil fuels.

"They still use it on Earth," Thora replied contemplatively. "But these robots don't come from there." *And how could they?* was the inevitable thought that followed. Those barbarians were barely able to send a sad little rocket to their own moon.

The two women split up, with Tamika going left around the block of robots and Thora right. Crouched low, Crest's foster daughter scurried forward, one hand on her beamer. At the end of the first block, she peered around the corner, saw Tamika across from her, and briefly waved to her. They arrived simultaneously at the next interval, and the next, and then suddenly Tamika was gone.

Thora sped up. She activated the hand beamer and disabled the

safety. With her weapon at the ready, she kept going to the next corner. She couldn't see Tamika, but she could hear her. The fragments of words she could make out didn't sound like she was talking to herself.

Looking around, she spotted Tamika at a kind of control bay embedded in the wall of one of the machine areas. Several consoles and screens were lined up next to each other, with seats built into the floor in front of them. Tamika was standing in front of the displays and watching with fascination as patterns of colors flickered on them.

"That's not for you!" said Thora. "A relapse would be decidedly bad."

Tamika didn't react. Thora tried to pull her away, but she resisted.

"Disable visual display!" Thora said to the computers.

There was no response. At a loss, she looked at the several dozen buttons and switches on the consoles. Each console had its own keyboard with Arkonide symbols. She touched one of the keys at random. The colored patterns disappeared; the screens showed various rooms in the base.

"What a shame," she heard Tamika say. "Can you bring that up again?"

"No." If she did, she'd have only been able to get her away from the screens using force. "You stand guard and watch my back," she ordered, sinking into one of the seats. It fit her like a glove. She spent a while scrutinizing the strange arrangement of keys. Were they mirrored, perhaps? In her mind, she tried flipping the keyboard around, but it didn't help.

She analyzed the way they were grouped. There were four keys in the lower middle with arrow shapes on them. She tentatively tried pressing the left arrow. The image on her console changed to show a different room. Thora clicked through an entire image archive, after which came the floor plans of individual rooms and sectors. Then she suddenly had a strange structure before her eyes —an arrangement of plates that rotated around a central axis. The plates moved in opposite directions, however, with the next one always rotating the other way from the previous one.

Thora spotted measurements. The individual plates were two hundred meters thick with a diameter of five hundred meters. The data fit with what she had observed so far. This was a depiction of

the base itself. But why was it so large? What purpose did it serve? And why was it in an inhospitable environment like this?

She could answer that herself. *So the locals don't discover it even when they've mastered space flight.*

Were the people of the third planet under observation? Quarantine, even? Thora ruled out the latter. There hadn't been any warning buoys around the system to alert approaching ships of this key detail.

The Arkonide pressed a few random buttons. Text appeared on the screen.

"Language analysis!" she said to her Positronic.

"None is possible. The letters resemble old Arkonide characters, but the word is unknown."

She tried entering her own name. *Thora da Zoltral.*

The screens instantly went dark; the consoles switched off.

"A silent alarm was just triggered over standard com," the Positronic reported.

"Then we'd better get out of here!"

Tamika rummaged around in a cabinet holding some energy weapons. They took two each; they couldn't carry any more.

They returned to the spiral staircase and rushed back up it, leaving hundreds of steps behind them. They ignored the next landing with a door. Thora still didn't dare enable the suits' anti-grav. It was better if they couldn't be detected by scanners.

"No signs of pursuit," the Positronic said after a while.

"Why should they be following us? Turn your attention to what's below us and ahead of us. They'll already be waiting."

The next landing was slightly wider than the first two, and the door was painted yellow and green. Thora hesitated for quite a while. She made Tamika change her shooting position twice to make sure they had optimal coverage. Then, with a jerk, she pulled the door open.

Arkon, their people's homeworld, was a paradise planet with magnificent buildings, perfect street grids stretching to the horizon, artificial waterfalls, floating planetoids two kilometers above the ground, spinning holograms of galaxies, and anything else the architects could dream up. Among all this, the funnel-shaped settlements rose up, with their inner courtyards measuring up to half a kilometer across, and their tiered balconies, gardens, and

luxury apartments for every citizen. Between the funnel buildings stretched parks with all kinds of exotic flora and fauna.

Not far above it glowed a pale yellow star.

Thora gasped for air. A gurgling came from her throat. She clung to the doorframe while Tamika's fingers clawed at her suit.

By the star gods...

But she was in no state to think or give voice to that traditional phrase. She couldn't even keep her thoughts together. The three-dimensional image in front of her was far too clear, too real, to be a hologram. The sun wasn't right. It hung far too closely above the settlement, close beneath the cavern's flat ceiling.

"A hallucination," she heard Tamika say in an astonished tone. "This can't be real."

"Describe to me what you're seeing!"

"It's..." Tamika fell silent. "I see Arkon in front of me. The Crystal World."

Just as Thora had expected. "You're seeing exactly the same thing as me. Which means it's not a hallucination."

Tamika groaned. "Then what is it?"

Thora swallowed again. Despite this scientifically grounded insight, the view contradicted everything they knew about the universe. She ignored the hysterical giggling beside her, grabbed Tamika's arm, and pulled the other woman through the door with her.

The closest buildings rose up into the air less than a hundred meters away. A breeze was blowing that set the bushes and trees swaying along with the windsocks on the outside of the funnel buildings. One third of each funnel building was open to allow the view to reach the vast inner courtyard without obstruction.

"Arkonide architecture, Arkonide letters, but an ancient language we don't understand, and technology from the distant past," Thora said to her companion. "There must be more to this. We'll find out what's behind it and why we were shot down."

"Someone's coming," said Tamika.

Small points broke away from the funnel buildings, then quickly grew larger. *Robots?*

"Follow me!" Thora da Zoltral started running, making for the rows of bushes and trees that would provide cover. "All systems at the ready!" she ordered. "We're under attack."

"That is correct. The approaching units are armed."

The settlement was no longer in view. Thora found it a relief not to have to look at the funnel buildings anymore. She wanted them to be gone as soon as possible.

The Positronic projected a translucent image onto the inside of her helmet visor. Several dozen red echoes were approaching at high speed.

"Identify the flying units!" she demanded.

"Negative, Commander. They are exclusively ground-based assailants."

An energy beam struck very close to her, blasting a tree branch to pieces. Splinters of wood and wet leaves rained down on her suit and clung to her visor. She hastily wiped them away.

The two suits' Positronics recognized the danger and activated their defensive shields as a dozen and a half robots spread themselves around the area.

"Requesting instructions!" Thora asked the Positronic. She wasn't a soldier, and she was well aware of her own deficiency in that regard. "What action should we take?"

The battledresses floated upwards to the treetops, and they hid themselves among the foliage. Thora spotted some of the barrel-shaped battle robots. In each of their torsos were half a dozen openings from which the barrels of beamers projected. Bursts of energy raced towards them, bathing their shields in a dazzling glow and making them grow to double their size. One beam hit the trunk directly below Thora. The treetop and all its branches tipped to the side.

"Peak danger level," the Positronic reported. "The robots are trying to destroy your shields with concentrated fire."

The suits dodged with maximum acceleration. The robots had to divide their attention. For a few moments, no shots were fired.

"Reinforcements are coming," said the Positronic. "Two dozen machines—no, three, four dozen."

"Communicate with them."

"They are not responding."

Thora sought out Tamika. They laid their helmets against each other and discussed in a whisper, planning to escape towards the buildings with their residents. The robots hopefully wouldn't shoot there.

"This plan is not viable," said the Positronic. "Aerial vehicles are now approaching."

Thora had never seen such vehicles before. Squat gondolas driven by noisy rotor blades were floating towards them. The gondolas were open at the top, and behind the railings stood the same barrel-shaped robots that were lurking on the ground below.

"We should surrender," rang Tamika's voice.

"Not before we know what we're dealing with."

The robots fired from above and below with all their weapons. Thora activated her suit's propulsion unit. Flying in a zigzag, she tried to escape the bubbling cauldron of energy. Between the settlement and the door to the shaft, the air was boiling over.

The robots paid no attention to anything else. A few shots went astray, hitting other robots, which exploded with a loud *bang* and sent black clouds of burned oil spreading out.

The flying gondolas were suddenly everywhere. Thora took direct hits from several weapons, throwing her off course. The Positronic kept the battledress level, but not much else.

"They have me!" Tamika yelled.

Gondolas placed themselves over the young Arkonide like a bell and pushed her downwards towards the assembled robots. Energy beams from two dozen weapons drove towards her. Tamika's suit tried to break through, but the gondolas instantly closed ranks. Thora watched with horror as the other woman's defensive shield failed. The young Arkonide staggered and was soon trapped between the sides of two ships. She tried to free herself with shots from her hand beamer, but a strike from a robot's arm sent the weapon flying out of her hand.

Thora arrived just in the nick of time. Sparks flew as her shield touched the gondolas and its energy unloaded itself into the metal. The gondolas peeled off. Tamika, freed, sped away.

The gondolas reacted with the speed one would expect from robots. In an instant, Thora was the energy beams' focus.

Concentrated fire!

The Positronic sounded an alarm. The battledress instantly plunged almost to ground level.

A blow hit Thora, the force of it knocking her off her feet. The defensive shield shimmered at her shoulder, then burst with a *crack*. She felt a strike against her upper arm and heard a shrill cry from Tamika.

"Stop! We surrender!" Thora screamed. The stinging pain in her upper arm told her that she had sustained a hit. "I am Thora da

Zoltral! Hold your fire at once!”

The robots didn’t react. They kept shooting, hammering the now unstable shield with their volleys. The Positronic disabled all remaining systems, including the air supply, and diverted all power to the shield generator.

This response probably saved her life. Thora covered Tamika. Her suit floated almost to the ground. The Positronic was clearly trying to stabilize the system. It didn’t work. The suit crashed down from a height of two meters, then was still.

“Tamika?” called Thora. The young Arkonide showed no signs of life. Her limbs were flaccid and lay on the ground, contorted into strange angles.

Another volley sent Thora skidding away. Dozens of energy beams were waiting along that stretch. The shield absorbed them, but the overload indicator had risen to a catastrophic level. Before Thora could get her bearings again, the barrel robots had surrounded her, and more of the gondolas were descending from above.

“Cease fire!” came a strange-sounding voice. “Cease fire immediately! You mustn’t kill her!”

Thora listened carefully to the voice’s unusual accent. This person was speaking the Arkonide language, yet it sounded foreign.

Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw a figure approaching. It was an Arkonide, without a doubt. He was tall, muscular, and had long white hair.

“Thora da Zoltral, indeed!” said the man.

“Who are you?” she asked, moaning.

“Rico!” was his brief answer.

13.

July 13, 2036

In all the years Bai Jun had known him, the general secretary hadn't changed a bit. He was still slippery smooth, pristine, his age lines hidden behind flab. Bai Jun wouldn't have been surprised if he'd had his wrinkles treated with Botox. The general secretary was short and fat, but he wasn't the jovial kind of fat, the kind who had any Buddhist tranquility about him. The angular, off-cadence movements with which he slid his shoulders and hips forward suggested determination and quick decision-making.

Who was this wall of a man? Huang Hai-Jie, one of the most powerful figures in the world. He loved to speak using the majestic plural, i.e., the "royal we" favored by rulers as an expression of power. And he had that power, even if he didn't flaunt it openly. It followed him in the form of half a dozen fidgety lickspittles, one of whom had a glass eye.

The man with the glass eye was the most dangerous, Bai Jun knew. That eye was a miniature camera that transmitted everything happening around the general secretary to a computer.

Bai Jun knew about the glass eye and hence knew that the man named Shoubi Man—which essentially meant "long arm"—played a surveillance role. He wasn't observing the comrade general secretary, of course, but everyone else.

Bai Jun had made suitable arrangements with John Marshall and Anne Sloane, who were hiding nearby along with the four astronauts.

"It's a pleasure to see you, Comrade General Secretary," said Bai Jun. He saluted firmly as his visitor reached the lower end of the helicopter's gangway. "Follow me, please!"

He went to the armored limousine that had been specially delivered on a transport from Beijing and waited beside it. Huang and his companions got in as the general went to the Exter Idle all-terrain vehicle waiting behind it.

“A truck with new munitions has arrived,” his driver greeted him. “One of the inspectors from the general secretary’s advance party has checked it over.”

Bai Jun acknowledged this with a nod. “I’ll take care of it later.”

The munitions had purposely been arranged to arrive in advance of the ceremony. They would symbolize the commanding general’s prudence and dependability. Huang Hai-Jie would be satisfied with what he saw.

The convoy drove over to the hill on which the soldiers had rebuilt the general’s tent. In front of the entrance, the supply company had laid out a welcome buffet with specialties of the local region.

The general secretary’s entourage got out first and inspected the area. Only then did the large man leave the armored limousine. Bai Jun, who had remained standing next to the all-terrain vehicle, surreptitiously observed the general secretary. When Huang saw the flag blowing in the wind, he almost seemed to grow. He saluted and bowed his head in front of the flag.

Bai Jun was satisfied. The objective for today was: “Everything’s going according to plan. Nothing to see here.”

Then a lightning-fast motion from the general secretary made him jump. “Where are the captives?” he asked with a steely expression. “We want to see Rhodan and his people. China will have to make an example of them. And for the others here, we’ll set up a camp where they can earn the water and food we provide to them.”

Terrania as a labor camp. There was no better way for Huang Hai-Jie to stamp all over the vision of a united mankind departing for the stars. He was literally trampling Rhodan’s utopia into the desert sand.

“We’ll demolish some of the buildings to make enough space for the prisoner wings,” he told Bai Jun. “The remaining ones will be used for administration.”

“I will do as you command,” the general replied.

“So we would expect!” came the response. “Now bring the captives here!”

Bai Jun pretended to look annoyed, and Huang fell for it.

“You don’t know where these Americans and Russians are?”

“My people don’t have them. To the best of my knowledge, they

were taken to prison by a division of the secret service."

For the first time, the general secretary lost his cool. His face literally hardened. "My entourage will take care of it. They are authorized to issue directives to every secret service agent. You, Bai Jun, are responsible for ensuring that the victory celebration is a success."

Bai Jun countered in the same tone of voice. "Again, you can count on me. Oh, and here comes Le So Te, the subterranean waterway specialist. Drilling wells for Terrania—that is the top priority of the hour. Please excuse me, Comrade!"

As he moved away, he felt the general secretary's burning gaze on his back. Bai Jun shuddered faintly. He was overplaying his hand, and he could only hope that the other man hadn't rummaged around in his past. There were, after all, references to the youth theater group Cunning Dragon and their performances on social media—and over the course of the last few decades, Bai Jun hadn't been able to wipe out every trace of his former life.

Everything's going according to plan, he thought intensely, knowing that John Marshall was reading his thoughts and would instantly react to any nasty surprises.

The general didn't like that someone else could read his innermost thoughts. Still, he was too pragmatic to let it get the better of him. He allowed it because it was the only way to carry out his plan. Even so, the risk was almost incalculable. Marshall had the gift of reading thoughts, but it was erratic and required a degree of concentration that the American could only maintain for short periods of time.

An escape truck was ready and waiting in a secret bunker nearby, and Huang Chao, his devoted colonel, was waiting a few kilometers north with the helicopter to pick up the group of astronauts and mutants and carry them over the Mongolian border to safety. The truck bed also had three motorcycles tied to it in case of a true emergency.

The general went into his tent with Le So Te. They spoke about underground connections between the Gobi's lakes and water channels that flowed down from the Himalayas and found their way into soft layers of soil between hard rock. Following these paths with microprobes was one of the secret wishes of any geologist.

An officer Bai Jun trusted entered the tent. "Your orders have all been carried out," the man reported. "The soldiers are at their

posts."

Bai Jun acknowledged this without moving. "Excellent."

"Perry Rhodan and his friend fled with a jet aircraft, is that right?" Le So Te asked.

"With something like that. A kind of homemade vehicle, we don't know exactly. By now they should have long since been shot down or forced to land. I assume specialists from the secret service are dealing with them."

Truthfully, the general was hoping for anything but that. He hoped the two astronauts had gotten away and could soon return to Terrania to reap the rewards of what they'd sown.

At the same time, his plans were designed so that he could implement them even without the two figureheads. In the worst-case scenario, he would become the steward of the first two Terrans' legacy.

Le So Te laid some drawings on the table. They depicted hundreds of subterranean water veins that came from the Himalayas and its northern foothills and plateaus. They ran under the Gobi, which meant that in theory, there was enough water in the region. With all this, one could even transform a dried-out salt lake into a beautiful body of water.

Bai Jun turned to the officer. "When will the remaining members of the party leadership and the government arrive?"

"They've been circling over the Gobi for an hour. As soon as the general secretary gives the signal, they'll land and drive here."

Bai Jun roughly calculated the time frame in his head. That meant he still had a good two hours to get everything done. Huang Hai-Jie wouldn't let a single square meter of the city go uninspected before letting the big victory celebration go ahead.

"Plans for the city are being drawn up," the officer continued. "An initial list of buildings to be torn down is already available."

Among them was building thirty-four, where Rhodan's team had hidden the shield generator in the basement. Before the building really was torn down, the generator had to be gone. But he still had time...

"Where is Shoubi Man?"

The officer handed Bai Jun the binoculars. "We don't know exactly. Somewhere over there among the Rhodan followers."

Tens of thousands of them were still in the city. Most of them

had come to trust the soldiers who were giving them food and water again. They were setting up improvised camps and nesting in the empty apartment buildings. They were repeatedly checked by soldiers, who took away any mobile communication devices; Bai Jun didn't want too many reports from inside Terrania to reach the media.

Companies of soldiers were moving into the city. Bai Jun had deployed a large proportion of his troops to the center; the general secretary needed an impressive display. Now he activated his com device's encryption.

"Mr. Marshall, the man with the glass eye must be neutralized before the start of the ceremony. It doesn't matter how. He'll pass his information to the secret service agents, and we can't allow that."

He looked through the binoculars and found Huang Hai-Jie. Some of the lickspittles were accompanying him.

Bai Jun turned to the officer standing next to him. "Find Shoubi Man. He must be somewhere nearby."

Within minutes, the soldiers had ferreted out their target. He was prowling about all over the area, but above all observing the hill where the general was standing.

"A devious plan is afoot, Mr. Marshall," he said dourly. "The man with the glass eye is supposed to watch me more than anyone else. The general secretary has decided I'm dangerous. As of now, my hands are pretty much tied."

From this point on, he couldn't take a single step outside the tent without the camera eye seeing him. This was how every face-to-face conversation became a conspiracy, any time spent standing behind a bush into a deadly attack on politicians and party leaders. And if he got Shoubi Man out of the way, he would only draw more attention to himself.

Bai Jun realized that he'd have to put more on the line if he wanted to execute his plan. He gave the officer a special assignment. The man sent out four soldiers he deemed particularly trustworthy; their job was to keep Shoubi Man distracted by luring him to the city's most important places through conspicuous behavior. Faulty information could confuse him.

"The entire government has landed," came a communication from his com device. "They're almost here."

Bai Jun walked to the camp and visited Captain Liu Chang, a

man he knew from the military academy. An intense gaze, a vigorous nod, and then the general was outside and on his way again. One last check with the supply company, a short discussion with the officers who were ensuring that preparations ran smoothly, and then he went back up to his tent.

Now he was alone. All members of his staff, and the officers, had gone into action. His task was the one he liked least of all: receiving the bigwigs. With few exceptions, these were party mainstays who told the general secretary exactly what he wanted to hear and had probably never had an opinion of their own in their entire lives.

The sound of honking distracted him. Dozens of supply vehicles were on their way into the city. The soldiers were preparing the celebratory banquet that would follow the ceremony.

Bai Jun presumed he was still being watched—through a tiny glass eye with a frustratingly strong zoom. For that reason, he let his gaze rest only briefly on the convoy before it wandered to his wristwatch and then to the south, where the vehicles carrying the party members would soon appear.

The supply soldiers' convoy was fully assembled. In one of the small buses, hidden behind a false wall, were John Marshall and Anne Sloane. Before the ceremony began, Bai Jun's helpers would be brought as close as possible to the location where it was being held at the center of the city, perfectly hidden in one of the supply cabinets. There, the two mutants would wait for his signal.

Holding up the binoculars again, Bai Jun took in the buildings at the edge of the city. He scrutinized windows, searching for shadows and people moving behind the glass. He didn't find anything. And in the urban canyons, no soldiers were moving right now, only a few hundred Rhodan supporters.

The general lowered the binoculars. Shoubi Man was somewhere; he could feel it. He went back inside the tent, only to find himself face to face with the glass-eyed man. The frozen gaze from the left eye was decidedly disconcerting. The speed at which Bai Jun drew his pistol was too quick for even the built-in camera to see.

"What are you doing here?" the general snapped at him.

The other man just smirked. "Don't be so confident, Comrade General. I've been told to keep a close eye on you."

"Everything I do is coordinated daily with high command. Out

with you!" Bai Jun raised the weapon. "If in doubt, I'll insist that you attacked me or that I think you're a crazy Rhodan follower."

The man with the glass eye stared at him. He seemed to believe the resolve in Bai Jun's expression; without another word, he turned and left the tent through the narrow staff entrance. Bai Jun put the pistol away again. This was unlikely to be his last encounter with this snoop.

A messenger arrived from the city center. "The general secretary is constantly on the phone with someone," he reported breathlessly. "He seems dissatisfied about something."

"He doesn't have much control over the proceedings right now," Bai Jun replied. "That makes him nervous. In a few minutes, Shoubi Man will reach him. That will only make him *more* restless."

In almost any situation, there's a point of no return. It's part of the human psyche.

Bai Jun had pinned his hopes on John Marshall and Anne Sloane, but also on Rod Nyssen and Darya Morozova. In truth, he'd passed the latter two names to high command too and reported that the astronauts had been taken away by people who had identified themselves as members of the secret service. Even a general like Bai Jun couldn't do anything when faced with a secret service ID.

As long as no one found the astronauts in their hiding place, it would be smooth sailing. Bai Jun could even bolster his reputation among the party leaders by having his soldiers promptly find the hidden Arkonide shield generator after an intense search.

These thoughts ran through his head as he watched the helicopter that was flying to the city center. It was plain black, not painted in the usual camo pattern. Containing his anger, albeit with some difficulty, he saw it come to a stop above the square. Ropes unfurled, then members of a strike team climbed down them.

Bai Jun spoke into his com device. "Special forces are about to occupy the central square where the victory ceremony is to be held. They probably report directly to party leadership."

A series of limousines now rolled up to the square. The entire government had arrived. With a wave to his driver, Bai Jun had himself brought over to where the limos were stopping. He greeted the ministers and party officials with handshakes. They were accompanied by a dozen men in nondescript, off-the-rack black suits—undoubtedly members of the secret service.

Bai Jun maintained a friendly distance. His car was now leading

the small convoy. As the supreme commander, he insisted on personally escorting his venerable guests. Their drivers followed.

He left his vehicle at the edge of the large square. When he got out, his soldiers were standing still. Then, as he slowly walked towards the stage, following the moderately sized aisle as the street extended before him, the soldiers presented their weapons.

Breathless silence reigned. It was so quiet that you could have heard a bullet case falling. Suitable solemnity for an act of state, just as Bai Jun wanted. The general didn't let it show on his face, but he flinched when he saw a few of the strike team's faces; some of the soldiers had pulled off their woolen masks. As he stepped past, he gave them a good look. Bewilderment was visible on their faces now. The atmosphere of silence, the forceful nature of his personality—it all seemed so natural that these warriors forgot to even salute, which was an unforgivable error in the presence of a highly decorated general.

Bai Jun assumed they had been given very specific orders by General Secretary Huang Hai-Jie. The other man wanted to clean house, and he was going to do it directly after the celebration. When the event was over, the secret service was going to cart away every important officer from Bai Jun's division and squeeze everything they knew out of them. They'd be given no chance to hide or forget a thing.

"Mr. Marshall!" the general whispered inaudibly. "You have to render all of the strike team's firearms inoperable while I'm speaking. These people cannot have an opportunity to use them afterwards." He could only hope the telepath was reading his thoughts. There was no way for Marshall to send him a telepathic confirmation.

He stepped through the sand, not making a sound. The many soldiers followed him with their gazes. He liked a lot of the men. Sometimes he felt like they were his own children.

He reached the stage and ascended the stairs at a deliberate pace. As he stepped up to the lectern, he briefly saw a white towel in a window two blocks away.

"As soon as I'm halfway through my speech, the jammers must be switched on!"

When Bai Jun had taken over command of the siege, his first act had been deploying signal jammers. The plan had been to demoralize Rhodan and wear him down, and that required

complete isolation from the outside world. Now he would put those same devices to a very different use.

He saw the white towel again.

At last, Huang Hai-Jie reached the central square in his car. The general secretary burst through the solemn silence, noisy and at full-throttle. He leaped out of the vehicle and strutted to the VIP stand, where all the party operatives were assembled. Bai Jun watched him closely. The general secretary's face remained expressionless.

He waited until Huang had reached his seat, then began to speak.

Bai Jun played his role perfectly. He didn't have to fake it even slightly. He'd formed his character like an actor would, always from the angle of being successful and advancing in his career. At seventeen he had joined the army to escape the lack of prospects in his Uighur home region. As a mix of Han Chinese and Uighur, he had never really felt like he belonged to either group. His home was the army, and he served it with unconditional loyalty. He was the one you called if you needed an unconventional solution.

That was why he and his division had been redeployed to the Gobi Desert. That was why he was standing on this stage. A conflict with Huang Hai-Jie had only been a matter of time.

Now Bai Jun could see the general secretary bowing before him in the presence of the entire government and party heads. As Bai Jun was speaking the first words of his speech, he turned his brown, weather-beaten face to Huang and responded with a curt, gracious nod.

"This morning, the sun rose over the desert dunes, deep red and warm, to greet the day," Bai Jun said. "Now it shines upon the wisest and most distinguished leaders of the Chinese nation."

He watched Huang Hai-Jie unwaveringly. Every single word was supposed to imprint on him like a hammer blow. No one was paying attention to the general secretary; all eyes were on the speaker's face. Bai Jun spoke of the endless treasures that this land bore in its womb. He spoke of the water that flowed beneath the desert and of the fresh air all around. He lauded the achievements of the revolution, which still dominated every school book even though hardly anyone ever spoke about it anymore.

"Such a wonderful summer's day is especially well-suited for observing this victory celebration," he said. "The Third Division can

take credit for bringing events here to a prompt and discreet conclusion. We have achieved a victory. A victory over America and a victory over Russia. Astronauts and cosmonauts from both those lands took up residence here and started to build a city with the aid of alien technology. We don't know what kinds of strange creatures would have inhabited these buildings in the future. It doesn't matter. This land is Chinese, and we've made that clear to all. Our victory over America and Russia is a victory over the entire world."

That was the key sentence, the signal to go. The white towel appeared very briefly at the window again. The jammers came online, blocking all transmissions within a five-kilometer radius.

Bai Jun was impressed with his soldiers, who kept their faces impassive for the entire speech and were still presenting their weapons. He continued, calm and even, yet rousing. With its rising, level, and falling tones, the Chinese language was particularly well suited to a musical performance. When Bai Jun came to words he particularly wanted to emphasize, he let the tone linger slightly longer than usual. His voice was permeated with the theatrical style of speech he had learned as part of the Cunning Dragon ensemble.

It began, just as he'd planned. Soldiers in civilian clothing who had shown the honored guests to their seats now took up positions behind and next to the dignitaries. That was a sign that the speech was almost over.

Bai Jun watched Huang. The general secretary noticed the change slightly too late, finding his field of vision restricted on the sides. He reacted uneasily and with a short, jerky hand motion, as if to say, "Away with you!"

Bai Jun praised the party leadership, the government, and the Chinese people along with their past and their glorious deeds throughout time. "The sun will never set on the Gobi!"

While everyone was waiting for him to continue, a hundred shots rang out, fired into the air by his soldiers. At that instant, the men went into action. They blocked off the square from the surrounding buildings and streets. The members of the strike team realized only now that Bai Jun wasn't going to say anything else and that they should spring into action and carry out their mission. But Bai Jun's soldiers got there first, surrounding the special forces.

He watched as the first of the special forces readied their assault rifles and tried to fire. The weapons failed. Not a single shot flew. By now, a corridor had formed on the stands, along which the

plainclothes soldiers were leading the dignitaries down to the edge of the square. They conducted themselves politely and courteously, so that everything looked as though the party had planned this sequence of events.

The dignitaries came directly into the building where Bai Jun had arranged for the buffet to be prepared. There were folding chairs from the army's inventory with thick white pillows, napkins, and all kinds of alcohol-free drinks. His officers would do all they could to attentively look after the guests. Later, Bai Jun would join them.

Now, however, the general had more important things to do. He observed the withdrawal of the ministers and party operatives, who (understandably) looked stunned by the ceremony's abrupt end but didn't suspect that anything was amiss. They couldn't ask the general secretary, because he was being kept some distance from the others, just to be on the safe side.

The men of the strike team, meanwhile, were laying down their arms. They were too badly outnumbered, and their weapons didn't work. They seemed to have grasped that things were somehow not going remotely as planned. Their trained soldiers' eyes didn't overlook the fact that China's actual ruler was being led away as a prisoner.

14.

July 11, 2036

The bushes and mountain pines on the embankment above the fence gave him enough cover. He waited patiently for the sun to sink deeper so that not every corner of the slope was illuminated. Then he carefully started his ascent. The beechwood stick gave him purchase against the sometimes slippery grass and the gravel made from eroded limestone.

Every so often he stopped and looked at the buildings and the forty-story-high control tower. Floor by floor, the lights turned on; the dusk merely heralded the start of the staff's inevitable overtime.

Allan D. Mercant knew the area like the back of his hand. For years, every door in Nevada Fields had been open to him. As an agent of Homeland Security, no one had dared challenge him.

"Hi, guys!" he said quietly. "I'm back!"

He was right at the top of the most wanted list, presumably right below Perry Rhodan and the other astronauts who had set off for the Moon from here. No one would have expected him to go right back into the lion's den.

But that was exactly where he needed to be. He had to speak to Lesly K. Pounder. After the *Stardust*'s launch, Mercant had broken ties with the powerful bureau—and right after that, he'd found himself in a detention cell deep below Nevada Fields. His fate had been sealed; Homeland Security would have interrogated him extensively before finally making him disappear. No one would have questioned the whereabouts of an agent who was past his prime.

And yet, Pounder, who had never made any secret of his dislike for the agent, had surprised him by coming to his rescue. He'd provided him with new papers, letting Mercant make a successful getaway. Then Mercant had ended up in the company of Homer G. Adams, where he had found a new cause to devote all his efforts to.

Mercant looked up at the very top of the control tower. The

light went on up there as well. The brightly lit-up wraparound window looked like the top of a lighthouse.

"I'm coming," said Mercant. "Just give me half an hour."

The patrols along the electric fence had been reduced a while before. He knew the exact times by heart. The first guards came once the area was already in semi-darkness. Two men in a jeep; one was driving, the other holding a weapon at the ready.

Allan waited until the vehicle's taillights were no longer visible. Then he climbed the last of the way down to the trees growing inside and outside the fence.

The two forked branches were still in the same place they'd been before, one slightly higher than the other. Keeping careful balance, he sought purchase on the slanted ground with his shoes, angling the hardwood pole until it was resting in the forked branch on the other side. Then he grabbed on tightly on his side.

One last check. The stick held. With hands and overlapping legs, Mercant climbed up to the stick and got moving. Hanging above the electric fence at a distance of thirty to forty centimeters, he clambered over to the forked branch on the other side, then pulled the stick across after him. He hid it in the tree, climbed down the trunk, and relaxed his overtaxed muscles.

From the cover of the trunk, he looked out at the surrounding area. The hatches leading to the logistics department, situated underground, were open until 2200 hours. The photoelectric barriers stayed switched off until then, because otherwise every transport would set off the alarm. The high-security wing of the space engineering department was on the other side of the facility.

Mercant scurried away from the tree. On tiptoe, he crept to the hatches and picked one that was unlit. Metal stairs descended into the depths. Using his flashlight, he crossed a number of storerooms and entered the tunnel that led close to the control tower. If he heard any noise, he stopped or retreated into one of the side passages.

Moving like this, it took half an hour before he reached the first access hatch. The code was still the same as it had been three weeks earlier when he was last here. The door hissed lightly as it opened to let him through.

A hundred steps later, he was standing in the elevator that would take him up to the thirtieth floor. There, he changed to a different one. Twenty seconds later, he was standing by the door to

the office of NASA's most important man.

Mercant knocked. A muted "Come in!" sounded.

He turned the door handle and entered. Six or seven meters away was the man some of his colleagues called the "old dog."

"I hope I'm not disturbing you," Mercant said.

Pounder sat up straight, furrowing his brow. He seemed unsure of what to make of his visitor.

"Press?"

"Worse! Your fake ID worked wonders. I'm still living free and easy."

"Mercant? I can only tell from your voice."

"I had to change my appearance again. The mustache isn't exactly my favorite look, but it gets the job done. The glasses and the subtly different skin tone help as well. My hair's also been lightened a touch. It matches wonderfully with my latest photo."

"What are you doing here?" Pounder eyed him skeptically. True, the flight director had helped him escape, but that didn't mean he trusted him by any means. Pounder was used to having things under control. Surprise nighttime visitors were guaranteed to annoy him.

"I never imagine I'd be back here so soon," Mercant replied, skirting the question. "Do you remember what you said to me when you gave me the fake documents? You said outright that I'd betrayed America and broken my oath but done an immeasurable service for humanity. You opened my eyes, Pounder! That's why I'm here."

"I'd describe it more as the last little shove you needed to put you on the right path. Anyway, you're saying you want to support Rhodan? I reckon you're here too late. Even I can't do anything."

Pounder gave a brief outline of what he'd experienced in recent days. He was standing before the broken fragments of his life's work. His dream of contact with aliens had turned into a horrible nightmare that tortured him every night and made him wake up in pain. Rhodan was presumably in Chinese hands or dead by now. The Arkonides' mighty ship had been destroyed. Pounder himself had played a role in its destruction by enabling the second Moon mission.

"You blame yourself?" said Mercant, interrupting him.

"Yes," Pounder replied in an uncharacteristically quiet tone. "Michael Freyt was a good man. He deserved a better fate than to

commit suicide in the name of a dishonest cause—and in the process wipe out the irreplaceable Arkonide ship and its entire crew."

"You had no choice. The president is the one in charge."

"That's true, but—"

"If you'd disobeyed, someone else would have been put in your place. And who'd have saved *you* from a Homeland Security cell?"

Pounder stood up, walked over to the window, and was silent for a moment. Then he said, "It tastes so bitter. We made first contact and immediately messed it up. Mankind is clearly not capable of contact with aliens. We fall back on hysterical, psychopathic responses that lead to us destroying foreign visitors even when they're in need. We imagine any justification we need to, up to and including fleets of evil enemies bent on destroying the Earth. But admitting our own failings? That we *can't* manage. Not us Americans, at least. Not even close."

"Does that surprise you? Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, Colombia, and wherever else, it was always the same. Why expect anything different where these Arkonides were concerned? The people in charge of Homeland Security live in a world of frenzied rage. They'd have accepted the destruction of the Moon if it let them be one hundred percent certain the alien ship was no more."

"I fear you're right." Pounder turned around again. "Why did you come back here? Haven't you heard the latest? The Chinese have taken over the *Stardust*'s landing site in the Gobi. No one knows what's happened to Rhodan and Bull. Either they're dead or the Chinese are getting them ready for a show trial as we speak. If they want to see how it's done, they can look at what we're doing with Crest."

"Now that's an ugly business," Mercant agreed. "Nauseating, quite frankly. But you're wrong about one thing. Rhodan and Bull are neither dead nor captured."

Pounder jumped. "What do you know, Mercant?"

"A lot of things. Rhodan and Bull are safe with us."

"And who exactly is 'us'?"

"I'm working with an eccentric multibillionaire called Homer G. Adams. His means are inexhaustible, as are his connections. He's on Rhodan's side. And he has a team on his side the likes of which the world has never seen. Do you believe in the existence of parapsychic gifts, Pounder?"

“Honestly, until a few days ago, I’d have called the idea total nonsense. Nothing but a wish fulfillment fantasy.”

“And now?”

“I had some visitors. Right here in this room. A man in his mid-thirties and two kids. The girl was missing a hand and the boy seemed like he kind of had a screw loose.”

Mercant couldn’t help but laugh at Pounder’s dry description. “John Marshall, Sue Mirafiore, and Sid González. All three of them have gifts that would have seemed impossible until now.”

“I noticed. Sid can teleport himself and bring other people along with him, right?”

“Yup.” Mercant nodded. “And that’s why I’m here. We call these gifted people ‘mutants,’ and with their help, we can save Crest.”

Mercant had expected enthusiastic agreement from Pounder, but instead, the flight director contorted his face. “That’s not going to work. President Drummond may have the open-mindedness of a common housefly, but he’s also exceptionally crafty. He’ll be expecting a breakout attempt. For all we know, this trial is just a trap to lure Rhodan and Bull back to the US.”

“That’s what I’m assuming. But let me ask you this: is a trap still a trap if the victim knows about it in advance? I don’t think so.”

Pounder walked back and forth. “You have a lot of fancy words, and I can’t deny I’m happy to hear them. I just don’t see how you’ll turn them into reality, even with these mutants. And I have a totally different question besides.”

“That being?”

“What do you want from me?”

“Your help, Pounder. Your people’s help.” Mercant walked over to the window and pointed down. Light still glowed in all the buildings; men and women were working overtime. “The astrophiles, as you so gladly call them. In their hearts, these people feel the same way as you. In their hearts, most of them are on Rhodan’s side.”

“That may well be true, but I don’t see how it gets us anywhere. Their hands are tied, as are mine.” Pounder went over to the desk and picked up a cup of coffee. He sipped at it and swallowed hard. It must have been cold. Even so, he didn’t put the cup down again before starting to pace up and down the room.

“We’re not asking you to do anything illegal.” Mercant allowed himself a soft smile. “All we need is the very thing NASA is all about: a spacecraft.”

“You need *what?*”

“You heard correctly. A spacecraft.”

“Then you’re barking up the wrong tree. The *Starchild* was shot into space on our last ready-to-deploy carrier rocket. We—”

“I don’t mean that kind of ship.”

“Then what kind *do* you mean?”

“The kind you’re putting together in a hangar in Cape Canaveral.”

Pounder didn’t reply, but the cup slipped through his fingers and smashed on the floor. That was answer enough for Allan D. Mercant.

15.

July 13, 2036

The sun was still shining from a radiant sky. The soldiers had mustered to hear their general's victory speech.

Bai Jun smiled quietly to himself as he walked up onto the stage for the second time that day. This time, the soldiers were standing more tightly packed in a single block around the podium. Tens of thousands of people were crowding onto the square and the surrounding streets. The general had arranged for extra speakers to be installed so that his words would be heard everywhere.

Bai Jun hadn't had time to fully prepare a second speech. A few pages of keywords would have to suffice. The notes also accounted for the fact that a lot of his listeners didn't speak Chinese. He had to deliver the speech twice, once for his soldiers and countrymen, and then a second time in English for Rhodan's followers from all over the world.

One of his most loyal comrades came over to him. Colonel Huang Chao. The two of them shook hands.

"The camera dollies are in position, and the cameras are installed. The speech will be broadcast live by at least three networks."

"I want the pod recordings of the nuclear explosion to be played during the broadcast," said Bai Jun.

"That's all set up."

"Are there screens for our government guests?"

Bai Jun knew the party officials and ministers had understood what was going on around them by now. They had stopped eating and drinking and were now having frantic discussions instead. The general secretary himself was sullenly refusing all conversation.

"No," said the colonel with a friendly smile. "I'd advise against it. One of the old men or another might have a heart attack. That wouldn't serve our cause."

Bai Jun saw his point. "Then there's nothing left to stand in the

way of the real ceremony."

"Maybe we should wait a little longer," Huang Chao suggested. "The most important men for this celebration are still not here. And we don't have a flag!"

"The flag will have to wait. And without the ceremony and the broadcast, Rhodan will never find out what happened here. Or he'll find out far too late. Let's get started."

Bai Jun stepped up to the microphone.

"Not that long ago, an American spacecraft landed on this bleak patch of the Gobi Desert. The *Stardust*," he said alternately in Chinese and English. "It was returning from the Moon, piloted by the American astronaut Perry Rhodan. He and his crew had been sent by their government to discover the fate of the American Moon base—officially, at least. In reality, the US government suspected that alien life had taken up residence on the dark side of the Moon. Perry Rhodan and his crewmate Reginald Bull met these aliens. They call themselves Arkonides and resemble humans to an astounding degree. Rhodan succeeded in establishing friendly contact with them. Then he returned to Earth. However, he had a surprise on board."

Bai Jun paused and took in the audience's mood. All was still in the square. The people were hanging on his every word even though they already knew the story he was telling.

"An Arkonide named Crest da Zoltral, the same man who is being put on trial in the United States of America at this very moment. Crest was gravely ill, and Rhodan had promised he could be cured. Rhodan didn't land this ship in his own homeland, but here in the solitude of the Gobi, a part of the People's Republic of China."

The general thought back to the moment when his adjutant had brought him news of the landing when they were in that casino in Macau. *He's gone mad!* had been his first thought. And the second: *This event is of incomparable importance.*

"My homeland ordered me here. Extraordinary things happened here. An invisible dome of energy shielded the *Stardust*, its crew, and Crest the Arkonide. It couldn't be beaten with force, so I sought discussion." Bai Jun raised a hand and gestured towards the edge of this empty city called Terrania. "Not far from here, he and I met for the first time. I confess I was impressed by Perry Rhodan. By his courage. But his naivete appalled me. Rhodan believed in the good

in people. I'm a soldier; I knew he was mistaken. I called on him to see the error of his ways and surrender. He refused, of course, and so events took their well-known course."

The general drank a sip of water from a glass an attentive officer handed him. It was refreshing and cool in this place that knew only heat and dust during the day and, even in summer, bitter cold at night.

"Perry Rhodan and I were destined to be enemies. So it seemed. And despite the Arkonides' near-magical technology, his defeat was predetermined as well. This defeat has occurred...so it seems. The energy shield has fallen, Terrania is in my troops' hands, and Rhodan himself has vanished without a trace along with his comrade, Bull. My victory is complete. So it seems."

He paused and gazed out across the square. Tens of thousands were hanging on his every word.

"But appearances can be deceiving. *I* have lost. I, *General* Bai Jun. The general who stands for his country. This country, its leadership, has failed. It has betrayed me and my men. It didn't hesitate to set off an atom bomb—and if not for certain happy circumstances that I'd prefer not to elaborate on at this stage, I would be dead. As would every one of you. I swore an oath to this nation and its regime. More than once, I have put my life on the line to satisfy that oath. Now that oath has been broken. And the ties that bind me to my country are cut. Irreversibly."

Bai Jun closed his eyes and gathered up the strength within himself for the next words.

"As of now, I renounce all ties to my country. I no longer serve the People's Republic of China. From this moment on, I serve all of humanity!"

He was met with stunned silence. Then someone started to clap, and within a few seconds, the entire crowd followed.

He raised a hand to demand their attention again. He still had more to say. The applause ceased.

"I hereby declare the Chinese government deposed," he said into the silence that now signified incredulous but joyful expectation. "This place no longer belongs to the People's Republic. This city, Terrania, belongs to all the people of Earth. The Third Division, under my command, will ensure that it remains that way. Until Rhodan returns."

He fumbled at his belt and pulled out his Swiss Army knife. He

went to the flagpole and cut through the rope.

The Chinese flag dropped to the floor in a cloud of dust.

Bai Jun, the general, who had served his nation unconditionally, was no more.

16.

The Past

The room was bright, the walls white. Machines and cabinets, shimmering like silver stood around the bed—an actual bed, not an anti-grav lounger. With her fingertips, Thora checked the quality of the bed linens. They were smooth and pleasantly cool.

Her left shoulder was in a thick plasma bandage. The burns were significant, but the transplant was already taking effect. The Arkonide tilted her head to the side. The tentacled cone by her feet was no doubt the med robot.

"Where's Tamika?"

Silence. Thora assumed that the robot was capable of speech; she took it as a bad sign that it didn't answer her question.

"Help me get up!"

The machine didn't stir. Only when she rolled onto her right side and tried to push herself up with her uninjured right arm did it show any movement. A tentacle reached out and pressed her softly but firmly back onto the pillow.

"You must stay in bed until tomorrow at the earliest!" said the robot. It spoke the Arkonide language, albeit with a strange accent. That meant this really was an Arkonide base. The thought electrified Thora. The coincidence of them being led here was so unlikely. Could it really be a coincidence at all?

"Where am I?" she asked the machine.

"In the medical station."

"I can see that. What medical station? Where?"

"You are in Zarakh'khazil."

"'Dark crater.' Hmm." It was a strange description for the base she had seen depicted on the screens. Even the geological formation outside the entrance had reminded her of everything *but* a crater.

The surface around the base could have been applied artificially, Thora considered.

"If this is an Arkonide base, who built it? And why?"

The robot fell silent again. A shadow appeared at the upper end of the bed; a tube bent over Thora. With a hissing sound, the end of the tube touched her shoulder. A light jab indicated that it had injected her with something.

"You need antibiotics to maintain your body's resilience," said the robot. "That, too, will accelerate your healing."

"I'm not worried about my own healing. It's my companion I care about. How is Tamika doing?"

Silence.

"If she's no longer alive, I need to find out."

"You will find out."

The machine wasn't going to tell her. Thora recalled the last few seconds before she'd lost consciousness. There had been a man there all of a sudden...an Arkonide. He had ordered the robots to stop shooting. He had also told her his name. A strange name...

"I want to talk to Rico!" she demanded.

Thora didn't want to admit defeat too readily, but the injection had clearly included a sedative. She felt herself becoming tired in an instant. She tried to fight against it but was quickly forced to give in.

She sank into the dark depths, then woke up to a soft pattering of water. Her thoughts turned to a relaxing bath, but when she was fully awake, it turned out to be no more than the monotonous dripping of an infusion. Beside the bed towered a stand with an old-fashioned plastic bag, from which a tube led to her arm.

"What is..."

"The wound has become inflamed," said the med robot. "You are too agitated. That hinders your healing."

"Where is Tamika?" she asked. She was amazed by the clarity of her thoughts. By her concern for Tamika too. On board the *Aetron*, she had barely even noticed the young woman, but now she was the only companion Thora had left.

"I am not authorized to provide that information."

"I'm a da Zoltral. I insist on being informed. If Tamika's no longer alive..."

She knew, of course, how pointless it was to argue with a programmed machine.

"You can see her, but only from a distance. There is a risk of infection; I'm sure you understand."

The bed moved from its position and rolled through a hatch.

The floor had started moving, taking the equipment along with, and transported her approximately twenty meters through a connecting tunnel to another station.

The light was dim. She could hear the soft humming of machines extracting the used air via pipes. Pumps were running. When Thora strained to lift her head, she could see a similarly boxed-in area that she assumed held Tamika.

"How is she?"

"Speak to her," said a quiet robot voice. "Perhaps she'll recognize your voice."

She did so. "Tamika, everything's going to be fine," she said, instinctively staying quiet as if the voice might frighten her. "We survived the attack. The robots are taking care of us. We need to get plenty of sleep."

No reaction was detectable. Her vehicle started moving backwards and brought her back to her room.

"I insist on speaking to this base's commander immediately," she demanded. "He owes me some answers. Why did he try to kill us?"

The med robot gave her no response and left her alone again with her questions and thoughts.

Eventually, another robot rolled in and over to her, scanned her body from top to bottom, and took blood and tissue samples. Shortly after that, there was another hissing around her arm.

"You will sleep again," the med robot informed her. "After you wake up, you'll feel significantly better."

She faded out into a deep, restorative sleep. When she finally woke up again, she saw a mirror above her. It showed a shriveled old woman with a bald head and pale yellowish eyes. The corners of her mouth hung down limply. Worst of all were the bags under her eyes; they hung over her cheeks like flaccid rags of skin.

Thora swallowed dryly. It took a while to recognize herself in the image. The ancient-looking woman was her.

How long was I asleep? Is it possible that I've aged this much in a short space of time?

She turned to look at the med robot, but it was no longer there. The room she was lying in now had no furniture or equipment, just her bed. The walls and ceiling showed the starry sky, with Thantur-Lok visible as it looked from Arkon. On the door, and opposite,

between the suns, were a few aphorisms. “When the star gods call you to them...” and “Everywhere you are, we are too.”

Where was she? In some sort of death chamber?

“Tamika?”

Thora received no response. After a while, however, the back wall opened to reveal a chamber in which flames and countless gas jets blazed. Far too late, Thora realized she was in a crematorium.

“Stop! Halt! This is a mistake!” She was convinced that the robots had mixed her up with Tamika.

Thora gathered up all her strength and shoved herself over to the edge of the bed. She tried to stand up, to bring herself to safety, but she was no match for the pressure bearing down on her. She screamed for help, but no one heard her. In her desperation, she tried to cling on to the side of the chamber, but the automated motion kept sliding the bed unstoppably onward. Her hands slipped off, and then the chamber shut itself.

They’ve sentenced you to death. But why?

Bathed in sweat, she woke from the nightmare and was no longer sure if she wanted to stay alive or if she would rather die.

This time, he wore a white tunic with a silver trim. He had tied his long, white hair into two side braids.

“You saw your companion, Thora da Zoltral,” he said. “Tamika’s not doing well, but her condition is not hopeless.”

“Is she going to live?”

“No one knows. Her burns are very serious. It takes time to generate replacement tissue. We can only hope.”

Thora sized up the stranger with a penetrating gaze. All she knew so far was his name: Rico. He seemed to bear no title or rank. It also seemed as though there were no life-forms in the base apart from him.

The name Rico sounded more Terran than Arkonide. And yet, the man’s appearance left no doubt.

“You’re an Arkonide,” she said, changing the subject. “You speak Arkonide, but with an accent I can barely understand. The facilities in this station have Arkonide letters on them, but they’re used to write an ancient language. Your behavior also indicates that Zarakh’khazil is not an official Arkonide settlement.”

The man’s face remained impassive. Thora wished she could read his thoughts. That was simply a naive fantasy, of course. No

one could read minds.

"Shooting down your ship was a mistake," he said. "In the nearly two weeks that you've been here, I've had enough time to weigh the pros and cons. It would have been better to let you keep flying. You'd never have found the sanctuary."

"Two weeks?" Thora would never have thought so much time had passed. She thought about Crest. Was he still on the humans' planet?

"For the first week, the med robots kept you in a recuperatory coma, as they have with Tamika, your companion. The robots' weapons left terrible wounds."

Thora's thoughts swirled around in a jumble. Everything the man had tried to tell her so far sounded contradictory.

"Why were we shot at, then?"

"Because that's what the weapon systems are programmed to do. They reacted to what happened in the airspace. Your vehicle's weapons systems were activated."

"Only the defensive shield, and that was because we received a distress signal from the third planet's moon."

"That was enough for the Positronic."

"Why didn't you stop it?"

"I was indisposed." Rico said this in a tone that made it unmistakably clear to Thora that he did not plan to elaborate on this.

Thora reined in the rage that was flaring up inside her and forced herself to get past it. This Rico hadn't intervened. Evidently there were no other Arkonides who could have done so. Was he indeed the only life-form in this station? For a place he had described as a "sanctuary," she found that decidedly strange, even suspicious.

"You're hiding something from me, Rico!"

All he offered in reply was, "Accompany me to the guest area, Thora da Zoltral!"

He went ahead, and she followed. What else could she do? Her first steps were unsteady; she had to use the wall for support. She felt ill. However, this sensation quickly abated, and she found unexpected strength inside herself. The days of sleep had evidently done more than just heal her wounds.

The guest area was off the funnel building's inner courtyard. The generously sized reception area was divided into several spaces

with panoramic windows and terraces. Half a dozen mechanical gardeners were diligently going about their work, picking up leaves, cutting and watering plants, and cleaning the gravel and tiles.

Rico offered Thora a seat and sat across from her.

"Everything you're asking about has a simple explanation," he said. "The sanctuary has existed for ten thousand years in Earth's time."

Thora unwisely moved her left arm and felt an immediate stabbing pain in her wound. Rico raised his hand in a gesture of caution.

"The pieces are slowly falling into place," she said. "That's why the technology and language seem foreign to me. Our databanks don't have even the slightest indication of an earlier expedition to the Sol system."

"That's hardly surprising. At the time, the methane breathers were on the verge of overrunning Arkon. Arkon waged bitter wars against them. None of the fleeing colonists made it into the sanctuary. I'm the last of the original crew. The rest died despite being put into artificial stasis."

Thora immediately followed up. "Colonists? So far away from the worlds and protection of the Imperium?"

Rico waved a hand dismissively. "That doesn't matter anymore. But tell me, Thora, what brings you and your companion to this system? And why to the second planet in particular?"

"An accident. The *Aetron* was on a research mission to another system when our spacedrive broke down, requiring an emergency landing on the third planet's moon." She wouldn't reveal anything further to this man. Not to anyone in the universe, in fact. "Since then, the robots have been busy repairing the ship. As soon as they're finished, we'll continue with our journey." She said nothing about their encounter with Perry Rhodan and Crest's humiliating flight to Earth in desperate hope of a cure.

Rico didn't question her statements. Instead, he said, "You're welcome in the sanctuary anytime. You and any surviving members of your crew."

Her eyes narrowed. "You're talking about the *Aetron*, Rico! What do you mean, 'surviving'? Has something happened to my ship?" She suddenly remembered the last moments before the base's energy cannon had struck her reconnaissance ship. A distress call had arrived from the *Aetron*!

“Your ship has been destroyed,” Rico said in a neutral tone that reminded her of a robot. “The humans sent further expeditions to their planet’s moon, and the *Aetron* was blown up along with its entire crew.”

“That’s impossible!” Thora leaped up. A sharp pain drove into her arm. She hardly even noticed. “That can’t be! The humans are barbarians! Their technology is primitive. There’s no way they could damage a ship of the Imperium!” She roared it as loudly as she could. She roared because she sensed that Rico was telling the truth.

Without a shadow of a doubt, Arkonide technology outstripped Earth’s to an endless degree—but any technology was only as good as the being that operated it. And the *Aetron*’s crew were a pathetic lot with no interest in anything but their games. A being with enough determination and intelligence could outwit them. Perry Rhodan had demonstrated that. And he was just one human out of billions.

“I’m afraid it’s exactly as I said.” Rico had stood up. He gently pushed her back into her seat. “The specific details are unknown, but the scanner data is unmistakable: the *Aetron* exploded.”

Thora started to tremble. The *Aetron*, destroyed. She was alone. Alone and without hope. Without her ship, there was no returning to Arkon or any other civilized world. Nor was there any search for eternal life.

She thought of Crest. He hadn’t been on board the *Aetron*. He was alive! The trembling subsided. Her foster father was more important to her than her own life.

“There is one survivor,” said Rico. “Are you aware?”

“I believe so. Crest da Zoltral, my foster father. He was on Earth to…to research its inhabitants’ culture when the *Aetron*’s distress call arrived.” She looked up. “You know about him?”

“Yes.”

“And he’s alive?”

“Yes.”

The relief was so great that Thora almost grew dizzy. “Crest’s alive,” she said slowly. “He’s suffering from a terrible illness. Were they able to cure him?”

“I believe so, yes,” Rico replied. “On the recordings the base has intercepted from Earth, he looked healthy.”

“You have recordings? Show me!”

Rico hesitated and looked away.

"What's wrong? Why aren't you answering me?"

"I don't think you'll like them."

"Why not?" Her worries returned abruptly. "What's happened to him? Show me these recordings."

"As you wish, Thora." Rico waved his hand and a hologram appeared at the level of Thora's face.

"These recordings come from the nation known as the United States of America. Evidently, this nation is holding Crest captive."

Thora heard his voice as if through a tunnel. Crest was there. He was healthy; she saw that immediately. His body language gave it away. She hadn't seen him looking so full of energy for years.

But where was he? Why was he in the United States? That was where Perry Rhodan came from. But hadn't the astronaut forsaken that nation when he landed his ship in the desert on another continent?

There was a wooden railing. Crest's hands were resting on it, but he wasn't supporting himself with it. What were those metal rings around his wrists? A gleaming chain connected the rings—and bound Crest to the railing! Was Crest a captive? How could these humans even dare to do such a thing!

Then Thora heard a voice. It belonged to a human man. He was speaking English, the Earth language she had learned. It said, "Crest da Zoltral, in the name of all mankind, I hereby charge you with murder. Humans shall pass judgment on you, and humans shall serve you just punishment!"

"That's outrageous!" Thora leaped up. This time she welcomed the pain that shot through her arm. It stoked her anger; her burning, justified anger. "Rico, we have to help Crest!" She took a deep breath. "Whatever it costs."

EPISODE 8: THE TERRANIANS
PERRY RHODAN
NEO
Hubert Haensel

Take time to dream,
it is hitching your wagon to a star.

(Irish proverb)

Prologue

The night was full of noises. Sounds of rustling, murmuring, and whispering made their way in from the outside, interspersed by the piercing cry of a bird. Something must have scared it.

Walter Breck was unable to speak. His hands clasped and tucked behind his head, he looked up at the makeshift roof of his crooked hut.

The layer of clay between the bundled cypress branches was only barely holding the hut together. It was an amateurish construction, but at least it offered him some protection from the penetratingly bright sunlight. There was hardly any ozone layer over Florida and the Caribbean this year, and the number of skin diseases was increasing continuously. Was it really as harmless as the politicians kept announcing?

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil...” Breck murmured sluggishly to himself. This one pious sentence was already more than he had spoken altogether in recent years.

“I will fear no evil...”

He no longer knew the right words, searching for them in the deepest corners of his memory. He had never been a believer, had just jogged along as a young man, and then once he understood the world correctly...

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life!” was all that he managed before his memory of the psalm failed him completely.

Then he asked himself suddenly when the truth had so horribly revealed itself. Was there a God who had created Earth and humanity in his own image? The creationists’ power of imagination was like his hut in the deserted floodlands of Florida: bent out of shape, fragile, without any foundation. The next hurricane would leave nothing of it behind.

“All the days of my life...” he repeated hesitatingly.

Bullfrogs were delivering a noisy concert nearby. It didn’t really

disturb him, as he had very quickly become accustomed to it. The sky stretched above him, looking like it had been cut into strips by the bundles of branches. Only very few stars were visible.

Breck did not know them and did not even want to know what constellations they belonged to. Since the happenings on the Moon, he was finished with all of it. Aliens to him were the embodiment of everything that was fearful. What did they want? And more than anything else: what did they really look like?

Breck believed their humanoid appearance to be a trick. It was more likely that they were gluttonous spider-like monsters. Or lizards covered in scales. But one thing was for sure, they were the harbingers of the apocalypse. They were here to take the Earth away from humanity. The ship on the Moon was only the vanguard of their invading fleet, a reconnaissance vehicle. He was certain of it.

Walter Breck was convinced that the world's metropolises would soon burn. New York. Tokyo. Paris... He had been persecuted by such images since he was a teenager. Films had already shown long ago what it would be like when giant, invading spaceships darkened the sun. When shots of energy would tear apart skyscrapers and balls of fire would roll wildly through the streets.

How big was the alien spaceship on the Moon? A sphere with a diameter of five hundred meters—gigantic! The president had announced that the ship had been destroyed. But Walter Breck did not trust him. And even if Drummond was telling the truth, what if the other members of the aliens' species came to take revenge?

A flickering brightness broke through the mesh of the walls, and the hut seemed to dissolve in a pool of light. Breck screamed.

Seconds later, everything was in darkness again. It was like one of the terrible scenes from his memory that he could not banish from his mind. To make sure that he never had to go through that horror again, he had withdrawn to a life far away from all human settlements.

Kennedy Space Center, the former space travel hub, had been abandoned due to the rising sea level. Breck had thought it had an apocalyptic atmosphere about it when he rowed out in a boat that had been washed up on the shore a few days earlier. The former Cape Canaveral Air Force Station had been rapidly submerged beneath two meters of water. Cocoa Beach and Daytona Beach no

longer existed, and Orlando had degenerated to become a jerkwater town that, on better days, emanated the charm of a forgotten world. Apart from the southern area around Fort Lauderdale and Miami, the state of Florida was located in Agonie, a dying region.

The bullfrogs had fallen silent. Mother Nature was holding her breath. A dark reddish flickering seeped through the gaps, looking to Breck like the glow that would come from a blaze. There were enough halls and old tanks in the Space Center where explosive materials might still be stored.

Walter Breck got up a little too fast. A slight dizziness almost knocked him back down again, but he quickly found his feet. He reached for his flashlight and the double-barreled heavy rifle that could keep him from harm no matter what danger he faced.

The large pythons that slithered around the Everglades wreaking havoc already at the end of the last century had become a threat throughout Florida. But it was the alligators more than anything else that romped about the old space station, and there were some real monsters among them.

Everything remained silent as Breck pushed open the door. No flock of birds burst into the air before him, which usually happened as soon as the rusty hinges creaked. The pale reflection of the moon was sufficient to more or less recognize everything in his immediate vicinity. Things seemed to be okay. But Breck nevertheless went back into the hut to fill the pockets of his cargo pants with two dozen rounds from the box of ammunition.

It was almost impossible to see the hut at the edge of the small cypress forest from the air. Every now and again a helicopter roared over the expansive area, but none had landed there so far. Breck assumed that geoscientists were merely controlling the state of the dams that had been installed in an attempt to control the rising sea level.

Over there, at former launch complex 39, the ramparts were heaped up to almost five meters in height. The ocean had still advanced as far as the launch ramp and even flooded the huge hangar building.

Only a few kilometers separated Breck from the dilapidated NASA grounds. When he had first come here, he had wondered whether the building would be a better place to hide but soon gave up the idea. The risk of the aliens attacking these complexes from the air was too great, he thought. But if that were true, then he was

far too close to them anyway.

All of a sudden the bright light was there again. It bulged upward like a swelling blister, limp one minute before blowing up like a huge sphere the next.

It shimmered like liquid silver. Streaks appeared on the surface, then became blurred, and then it seemed to him that the light was coming from the inside and shining outwards.

Breck had never seen anything like it. It was futuristic. It did not belong to Earth. He felt a great urge to turn around and run away, but he couldn't move. He stood there as if he had been paralyzed and stared towards the launch complex.

The sphere lifted up from the ground. Breck could tell that it must be of gigantic proportions. He could only see the outlines of the deserted buildings, but that was enough for him to compare them in size. A diameter of up to fifty meters.

How big was the auxiliary craft the female Arkonide Thora had used to attack the Chinese army? He had seen it in the media while he was escaping to isolation. An impressive size, the real dimensions of which he was only just beginning to realize.

The sphere gained in height. It extended beyond the hangar building and changed its color again to the blood-red shimmer of a metal unknown to Earth. Especially terrifying was its almost complete silence. Breck kept expecting to hear the roaring sound of a heavy propulsion unit. What he heard instead was a slight hum. He couldn't know exactly, but he was almost certain that it came from the sphere.

There was a broad bulging ring all the way round the main body, a ring that no doubt held the engines, because it was from there that a bright bundle of flame flared out into the deep. The sphere continued to rise...and then glided in his direction. Breck stared at it aghast before turning abruptly on his heels to run as fast as he could.

The humming sound followed him. It sounded more and more like a swarm of hornets. Angry and threatening, throwing him into a state of panic.

Tangled vegetation slowed him down. He hurried into the brackish water, which was getting deeper, and found himself in the broad muddy surface that he usually did his best to avoid.

The humming caught up with him, and then it was right above him. He could hardly breathe and gasped for air. Shaking, he stared

upward. The spherical ship floated a hundred, perhaps two hundred meters above him, he couldn't tell exactly. Now it was shimmering in a dark silver tone, and the engines were no longer on.

It slowly sank again.

"No..." he gasped. Then, louder, he let out a piercing scream filled with panic and terror.

Walter Breck raised up the rifle and pulled the trigger, firing both barrels at the huge steely sphere.

Nothing happened. That strange glowing, as if it was coming from inside and penetrating the rear towards the outside, was an energy field similar to the dome that protected the astronauts in the Gobi who had returned from the Moon. Breck realized that he could not do any harm with a few bullets.

The spaceship glided farther. It was a terrible noise, that humming, as the sphere flew in a large arc to the next mangrove forest and then far out above the open sea.

Breck reloaded his rifle. He was shaking and only noticed at the edges of his consciousness that a number of bullets were falling into the mud.

He rushed back in the direction he had come from. When he turned to look around, the sphere was once again hanging over the launch complex. It looked as if it was descending, but he didn't wait. He fled—from himself and from these intruders.

He almost reacted too late as an alligator attacked with full force. He fired twice and both times hit the huge reptile in mid-run until it finally collapsed. He had learned from hunting in his younger years that these beasts were tough and possessed a damn keen instinct.

Had the aliens evolved from such reptiles?

You'll never get the Earth, Walter Breck thought to himself bitterly. *Never!*

He was already calm again when he reloaded the rifle and, leaning on the lifeless cadaver, fired again.

1.

July 14, 2036,
Supreme Court, Washington, DC

It was 9:30 am, the start of the second day of the trial. The courtroom was once again packed, occupied to the last seat.

Everyone stood. Crest, who did not react as fast to the Earthly customs, was grabbed by two uniformed men by the upper arms and elbows and placed on his feet.

"The honorable gentlemen, the presiding judge and the associate judge at the Supreme Court of the United States of America!" the court usher announced in a sonorous voice.

Clifford Monterny smiled derisively as those who had been called entered wearing black robes.

"Like well-trained penguins." His lips moved almost without making a sound, but Tatiana Michalovna was concentrating to understand what he was thinking. Reading his thoughts was one of her occasional tests to find out how her powers were coming along.

The young woman gave her mentor a surprised look but then immediately turned her attention back to what was happening in the courtroom. The jury members were taking their seats.

The charge was murder of the crew of the American Moon station—a particularly serious case. The victims had been helpless, hadn't had a clue what was coming, and the crime had been committed based on the lowly motive of covering something up.

The United States of America was the plaintiff against the extraterrestrial, Crest da Zoltral. Nothing like this had ever happened before. They were in brand-new territory that had the potential to completely unhinge an already stricken world. The media were all the more eager to get their money's worth out of the story.

Like blowflies on a heap of garbage, Monterny thought cynically. *And the real sensation will come when Perry Rhodan and Reginald Bull fall into the trap.*

Besides two Internet teams, only a few handpicked journalists had been given permits to enter the hall, personally chosen by President Stanley Drummond. This was something that not even the favored media representatives themselves were aware of. They were right there in the midst of it; it couldn't get any better.

Dr. Frank M. Haggard was called as a witness for the prosecution. The court not only had two judges for the trial, but also a jury. It was a judiciary event of immense proportions.

This trial was only about Crest. The charges against Haggard and Manoli were being drawn up separately. Neither of them had been charged with murder but were accused of high treason. The fact that Haggard was an Australian didn't seem to bother anyone.

Michalovna turned to Monterny and shook her head so slightly that it was barely noticeable. "The judges are free to decide as they see fit," she murmured as an answer to the "well-trained penguins" comment. "I cannot sense any coercion in their thoughts."

"The court cannot acquit Crest without compromising the president and the United States and being accused of being too lenient." Monterny smiled with pity. "The decision will be unanimous."

"Guilty!" Tatiana took a deep breath.

"A severe blow for the Arkonide. He was searching for the planet of eternal life, and what has he found instead?"

"Earth...and death!" Tatiana's eyes remained on Monterny's face.

"The media will be present when Crest takes his last breath," he said. "Above all, the countries that would have liked to condemn the Arkonide themselves will curse America once again as the hegemonic power and as only being democratic on the surface. And yet the Supreme Court follows law and order."

"It's actually crazy what's going on," the telepath agreed. "Crest probably has more knowledge in his head than our scientists will be able to gather in the next hundred years. Even if I can't get to him, his death means the irrevocable loss of everything he knows."

"No matter who ultimately took him—the Chinese, the Russians, or whoever..."

Monterny looked past Tatiana into the courtroom. The press had been given permission to take photos, and the flashing of cameras rained down on the extraterrestrial. The white-haired Arkonide allowed this onslaught to wash over him with a stoic

sense of calm. Was Crest hoping that help would come, or was he perhaps no longer capable of following what was happening around him? His serious illness, the constant alternation between hope and disappointment... Monterny believed he could sense increasing resignation in the Arkonide.

"Every land that has lost citizens and materials because of this alien would react in exactly the same way," he continued. "It is imperative that he be charged, sentenced, and then prosecuted, after which peace will return."

He laughed dryly as Tatiana looked at him in disbelief.

"Peace?" the Russian asked. "Did you really say peace?"

"When there is nothing left for the governments and militaries to fight over... The execution must, of course, appear to be two hundred percent real."

"A fake?"

Was Tatiana really so naive in this respect? Monterny couldn't have said with any certainty. But what was reality the way it appeared to be nowadays? The world had gone crazy.

"Let's just call the whole thing 'real politics,'" he answered in a cautionary tone. "Crest could be a goldmine. If America could build a mere fraction of what got lost on the alien spaceship on the Moon, it would be a serious error to execute Crest. I don't know for sure, but I am assuming that Stanley Drummond is secretly thinking in that direction. With the help of alien technology, the USA could finally bring the world together as one."

"Therefore exactly the same thing that Rhodan and Bull are planning to do?"

"Those two are fools. They overestimate themselves and underestimate the nation states. Nobody can survive that kind of megalomania for long."

Tatiana smiled at him. "You're right, as always."

"And we need Crest for ourselves. What does highly advanced technology mean when one could have eternal life?"

Dr. Haggard looked younger than a man in his late forties, which he had just stated for the record. He looked strong, or at least like someone who worked out. He brushed a lock of dark-blond hair from his forehead.

"You are a doctor?" the presiding judge asked. "Tell us more about that."

“My work has several different focuses,” Haggard said. “My research work earned the Nobel Prize for Medicine four years ago. The committee referred back then to the breakthroughs in my research into the HI-Virus...”

“The court knows of that, and it requires no further explanation.”

“I think that, for the court’s decision, it does.”

“Please refrain from arriving at your own conclusions, Dr. Haggard! The Supreme Court is interested in other aspects of your work. You know the accused?”

“Crest...”

“Crest da Zoltral. You treated him as a patient, did you not?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Did you know at the time who he was?”

“I’m afraid I don’t quite understand the question, Your Honor.”

“You are aware of what happened to our Moon base, are you not?”

“It no longer exists.”

“Did Crest tell you that?”

Haggard shook his head.

“Could you please answer in a louder voice, Dr. Haggard! Where or from whom did you find out what happened to our Moon base?”

“From news broadcasts. Contact to the bases of all three superpowers was broken off. But that was not something Crest and I talked about.”

Clifford Monterny registered the slight gesture made by the judge, which was directed at the state attorneys. And a just as barely noticeable nod came from Jack Nesmith, the spokesman for the prosecution.

“You had already received that information from these...news broadcasts...before Crest came to you?”

“I believe so.”

“Do you only believe so, Dr. Haggard, or do you know it exactly?”

“I know it,” the physician confirmed. “It was before Crest and my colleague consulted me.”

“When you say colleague, do you mean Dr. Eric Manoli?” Nesmith continued. “Did he tell you what had happened on the Moon?”

“That Crest was part of the crew of a spaceship that was half a kilometer wide and had made an emergency landing, yes.”

“And what else?”

“Nothing.”

“Was there no time? Or...”

“Crest was in a bad way. I had to make treating him my top priority.”

“Did you know that the accused was responsible for murdering our crew on the Moon?”

“Objection, Your Honor!” William Tifflor was seen as a star lawyer in the USA. He had risen, his face expressionless. “Proving or disproving that is what this case is all about.”

Monterny was unable to see the face of the presiding judge. He looked at the telepath questioningly.

“He feels as if he has been caught in the act of having cut a deal,” Tatiana whispered to him. “He would like to shoot Tifflor to the Moon.”

Monterny was unable to suppress a grin. The Moon, of all places...

“Sustained. Strike the question from the record,” the state attorney continued. “You knew that you had a patient before you who was not human, did you not?”

“All that mattered to me was the fact that he was ill, not where he came from.”

“Considering the circumstances, you must have been aware that this...patient...had come from the Moon.”

“Even if he had come from the other end of the Milky Way, he was ill. Critically ill. It is my duty as a doctor to heal the sick.”

A murmur passed through the courtroom. The presiding judge called for discipline and calm by hammering his gavel twice.

“So you were perfectly aware, Dr. Haggard, that the ‘patient’ was a being who was in a position to wipe out humankind with superior weapons and turn the Earth into a desert unfit to sustain human life?”

“Objection!” Tifflor called out once again. “That is highly suggestive and there is no proof whatsoever—”

“Overruled! These aliens from outside our solar system—if that information is true—are quite capable of doing us catastrophic damage. The Supreme Court has photographic evidence showing the spherical auxiliary craft during the attack against the Chinese

army in the Gobi."

For a few seconds there was complete silence before the presiding judge turned once again to the witness. "Dr. Haggard, I repeat my question. Were you aware of the fact that your patient had the power to transform our planet into a battlefield?"

"Crest? Why should he, of all people, do our dirty work for us?" the doctor answered, taken aback. "We humans are already doing a very good job of annihilating our own planet."

Haggard's statement caused more unrest. There was suddenly an outburst of flashing cameras, which did not die down until the presiding judge threatened to have the courtroom cleared.

"Your own personal opinion on that is meaningless, Dr. Haggard. Do I have to remind you that any statements you make here can be used in the trial against you?"

"I have committed no crime! I am bound by my oath to save lives to the extent that I am able to do so. As far as Crest is concerned, it was possible for me to do that."

"Crest is not a human."

"I see no difference between him and us. Our contact with the Arkonides heralds a new age for us. In the future, the Hippocratic oath must come to apply to many intelligent beings..."

The sound of the door sliding open made Monterny turn around. His right hand went to his top hip pocket, and his fingers closed around the grip of the Arkonide raygun. It was a special weapon. How primitive the laser guns the military had been experimenting with for decades without any real breakthroughs seemed by comparison.

He relaxed immediately. The president had allowed him into the box above the courtroom of the Supreme Court. Nobody could see into it from the outside, and access was blocked.

"Deegan is coming," Tatiana said, but too late. She should have sensed him before that, but she had been concentrating too much on what was happening in the courtroom.

She's not anywhere near as good as I need her to be, Monterny thought. *She needs to be able to listen telepathically to everything going on around her. Our situation is not getting any more secure.*

Roster Deegan entered the box. His strained grin revealed his nicotine-stained front teeth. He remained standing after he had taken two steps in and lifted the large bag he was carrying.

Monterny paid attention to every move the former sorcerer made. Deegan squeezed his eyes together slightly. He was concentrating on the door, which moved behind him as if by a ghostly hand and closed silently. He dropped the bag at the same moment. It did not fall but instead floated towards Monterny. Before it reached him, it dropped down onto the parquet flooring and opened.

"Two battledresses." Deegan suppressed a cough. He was a little out of breath and looked paler than usual. He wiped the drops of sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand.

"Did anyone see you?"

The younger man shrugged. "The building is heavily guarded. And there's an army of reporters. Not one of them would hesitate to stick a knife between the ribs of his neighbor to get the best photos."

"Did they see you or not?"

"The police waved us through. But that rabid bunch of reporters almost stormed the vehicle. Guys like that go crazy when they see mirrored glass." Deegan grinned defiantly. "A few of them have more than one broken bone. And they haven't got a clue how it happened."

Monterny knew how. He also knew it made little sense to admonish him for it.

"All preparations have been made," Deegan announced.

"We're well within the time limit. Nothing much has happened so far, and three days are planned for the trial anyway." Monterny inspected the open bag, the contents of which weighed about two hundred pounds. Nobody other than the telekinetic could have carried it around so easily.

Monterny pulled out the two Arkonide suits that he had taken from Manoli and Crest. His army equipment in Iraq seemed amateurish by comparison. Both of these suits were years ahead of the best American war toys.

"So, let's put them on," he said to Deegan. He looked at the telekinetic with a questioning expression. Sometimes Roster was too lazy to even talk, but sometimes a look was enough.

"I'm pretty sure he hasn't received any information about where Rhodan and Bull are at the present time," Tatiana said.

"And you?"

Her hair hung disheveled across her brow as she shook her

head. It was sticky with sweat. Her already narrow eyes narrowed even further. Monterny realized that she was concentrating very hard. And yet she still found it difficult to sense and isolate the individual thoughts of people in the crowd.

After a short while, the young woman's tension subsided. "Nothing useful," she said weakly. "There are a few thousand people out there thinking of nothing other than Crest and the trial. I can't sense anything about Rhodan or Bull. If they really were nearby..."

"You aren't sure whether you can even locate and read their minds under these circumstances?" Monterny asked gruffly.

"Even less so when the distance is greater."

Deegan began putting on the battledress anyway. Monterny hesitated no longer either. An indescribable feeling came over him.

And how much more impressive must the huge spherical spaceship on the other side of the Moon have been?

Perhaps that was what had prompted Rhodan and Bull to act in the crazy way they had. The feeling of standing above all else thanks to the alien technology, of being invincible, could easily deceive a person... A danger to anyone who could not resist the temptation.

2.

July 14, 2036,
In the morning

Something was different.

Opening his eyes would have been the biggest mistake he could have made. Because he would have found himself in a cold and hostile world.

Reginald Bull turned onto his side and placed an arm beneath his pillow. He smiled, but did not realize that he was doing it. He was also unaware of the Black man who emerged slowly before him, looked at him thoughtfully, and then disappeared again in the same way he had come.

Bull wanted to find out what he had lost while he was waking up:

The gentle sound of the waves breaking on the beach, which was a lot more attractive than the demoralizing barrage of the Chinese artillery in the Gobi.

The salty breeze of the Pacific, and the sweet smell of the lush blossoms—both very different to the acrid stink of the poured-out gasoline and burning tires only two days ago in Western Australia.

The silky hula tones. The young Hawaiian women. All in all, there were enough good reasons to cling to the night.

But he was unable to find his way back into his dreams. Of all things, it was the silence that disturbed him.

He suddenly sat up straight. “Perry?”

Nobody answered. The room he had spent the night in was not very big, but it was still a ballroom compared to the constricted space in the *Stardust*. Pale light shone weakly through the heavy curtains.

He jumped out of bed and had a little trouble finding his bearings, because he had been dog-tired when they had...arrived? Appeared...at the apartment? When they were suddenly there. During the flight from Australia, he had managed one or two hours

of shut-eye at most.

He pulled open the curtains—old-fashioned, heavy brocade. His eyes scanned the sea of houses lying half asleep in the dawn light. Arlington County on the Potomac River, right across from Washington, DC, which was the reason there was already so much traffic on the roads.

The sun was just coming up over the horizon, its rays reaching out like fingers into the sky. Bull guessed it was going to be a beautiful day. At least as far as the weather was concerned. He couldn't say anything about how everything else might turn out.

He massaged his temples with both hands. "Crazy. It feels worse than a bad hangover. But when was the last time I had one of those?"

To wake up and not know where he was was not a good feeling. It gave him a sense of helplessness, made him feel he wasn't fully in control of his situation.

"I could at least ask the women who picked me up in the old days for an address. In the old days..."

He laughed quietly to himself, despite the fact that it was a pretty lame joke, he had to admit. And the black and red tartan bedding was even more of a lame joke. It wasn't only from the last century, it came from the last millennium.

He remembered Adams. Homer Gershwin Adams. Or that was what was printed on the just as old-fashioned business cards the man so generously handed out. CEO, General Cosmic Company. A company name that was a blend of nostalgia and futuristic thinking.

Adams was, after all, old enough to love tartan bedclothes. And he was British, possibly with a hint of Scottish national pride in his blood. What was more, he was a friend. Who else would have saved two deserted astronauts from the lynch mob of the insane Australians?

Okay, Bull said to himself. *The day is only just beginning. Let's make the best of it.* At least better than the pajamas he found himself in. His only concern at the moment was that someone might see him in this museum piece of an outfit.

After removing and neatly folding the clothes, he laid them on the pillow.

"We are back in the States, the prodigal son has returned to his homeland, and the window is not shuttered by iron curtains," he murmured. "What more could you want?"

He stormed up to the first door he assumed to be the bathroom and tore it open.

"Good morning, Reg!" Rhodan was standing at one of the two washbasins, shaving. "Everything's there: toothbrush, electric razor, safety razor, and even designer aftershave."

"A pretty noble place." Bull sighed. "They're trying to buy us, Perry. Stick and carrot. I smell Drummond behind this. Why am I saying 'smell'? Because it stinks to high heaven."

Rhodan shook his head. "Stanley Drummond would have made sure we were roasted in Australia. They suit you, by the way, the pajamas. Are they really made of pure wool? Crocheted or knitted?"

"The trial against Crest will be the main event." With a very slight nod of his head, Homer Gershwin Adams drew their attention to the news running on the screen.

Rhodan and Bull were sitting at the breakfast bar, enjoying the delicious food to the fullest. They hadn't eaten this well in weeks, Rhodan realized. The air smelled of roasted coffee, bacon, and eggs. A place in the world that was still intact.

Bull sipped from his cup. Rhodan could see that his friend was deep in thought. Although Bull was looking at the screen with an interested expression, the focus of his eyes revealed that he was far away. As if he were looking to find what the truth was behind the official blurb.

Rhodan filled his glass with orange juice from the carafe. The pictures, old scenes from the Gobi, and then from Washington, DC, spoke for themselves. People looking to witness a sensation were already gathering outside the Supreme Court Building. A view along East Capitol Street was shown. The Capitol in front of a slightly cloudy sky, the first rays of the sun breaking over the dome, their reflection sparkling. The national anthem playing quietly in the background.

"Those images are not from today," Bull commented with his mouth full. "They're just trying to create a certain mood."

The anthem became louder, the images changed to show the White House, also with a sea of flags. The president appeared briefly, raising his hand in a greeting.

Cut.

"Another sausage, Perry?" Bull asked. Rhodan shook his head.

The Washington Monument appeared on the screen, embedded

in the already strong blue of the sky. A squadron of fighter interceptors flew over the obelisk. The arrow-like, slimline machines created more distance between each other, turned on a very small radius, and were captured by the camera in a full shot.

After a few seconds, the director faded into the field of graves at the Arlington National Cemetery. The image was clearly going to transition to the murder trial.

As the roar of the jet engines got louder, Bull looked up into the sky. The interceptors he had only just seen in the news thundered over the house, flying low.

Adams, who had retired to the seating area with a cup of tea, shook his head lightly. “Don’t worry, Mr. Bull, you are both safe here. The house belongs to a real estate company, a subsidiary of my GCC. Apart from that, nobody can have seen you coming, and nobody will notice when you leave again.”

“Where is Ras Tschubai?” Rhodan asked.

On the Moon, when he had seen the damaged spherical spaceship of the Arkonides like a mountain of steel before him, he had realized that he was still capable of being astounded. He felt like a child who understood that there was a great deal more to the universe than just his own narrow view of the world. It was as if he had been standing in front of an insurmountable wall with all his knowledge and ability, and then suddenly a door had opened.

Initially hesitant, then a little tense, paired with caution, of course, and followed by a jolt that was driven by untamable curiosity, you step out of the shadow of the wall into the light of the passageway, which does not reveal anything at all about what lies on the other side. You have taken the first step, so the hesitation before the second step is barely noticeable. All of a sudden, a vastness opens up before your eyes that surpasses anything you have ever dreamed of. You find no words to describe it, overwhelmed by the possibilities you see coming your way, and then you take the next step and know that you will not let yourself be held back by anybody or anything—nothing will stop you from proceeding farther.

Tschubai...

The name alone made the hairs on Rhodan’s neck stand up. Hearing about people with supernatural powers was one thing, but actually experiencing it was quite another. Although what he had

heard before mostly had to do with fortune-tellers and telepaths, or now and again about supposed telekinetics. There had also been occasional rumors about military experiments with telekinetics and teleporters, but there had never been any real evidence that they were true.

But such people obviously did exist; those with psi powers that were like wizardry. A touch, a thought, and already you were standing fifty or a hundred meters away without having moved yourself. And Tschubai was by no means the only one.

"You have perhaps already met some of the people who work for me." Adams's voice sounded to Rhodan as if he was concentrating on every syllable. He believed he could hear every nuance in Adams's questioning and expectant tone of voice.

He remembered the conversation.

"I don't know who you mean, Mr. Adams."

"You wanted to go to them in the Gobi Desert to give them your support."

"Maybe they were there. I've no idea. Tens of thousands of people from all over the world were there and tried to break through the siege by Bai Jun's army. But then there was the nuclear explosion, luckily far enough away. I can't even think about what might have happened if it had happened closer to Terrania."

Terrania. A pompous name for an emerging city at the edge of the salt lake. Rhodan was aware of that himself. On the other hand, it was totally unbelievable how fast and with what purpose the Arkonide robots had worked on it. He stayed in his memories.

"Sid González? John Marshall? Sue Mirafiore?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Adams, I've never heard those names before."

"That's why you were so surprised by Tschubai's psi powers. I should have realized. You see, Sid is also a teleporter."

Rhodan noticed that Adams was examining him. He looked up. The old man nodded with a smile.

Does he know what I'm thinking? No, he's not a telepath. He only has a photographic memory and very good instincts. At least, that was what he had given them to understand.

Rhodan pursed his lips as the image of a dimly lit room entered his mind. With heavy furniture, a thick carpet, curtains that dampened all superfluous noise. A shiny crystal ball on the small table. Adams sat in front of it with his hunched back, rubbed the crystal ball gently with both hands, and told paying clients what

they wanted to hear.

Maybe that could have been a possibility. Homer Gershwin Adams, however, did not follow that comfortable path. He had made better use of his abilities and, despite a number of setbacks, built up a financial empire. He had long since been playing with sums in the billions the way others did with ten-dollar notes. That's, at least, how he had explained it.

"The real estate and bank crisis at the beginning of the century, and after that the agonizing disaster with Europe, the crisis in Asia... At the time, I was able to establish my network and got hold of a few lucrative commitments for bargain prices. Even those with good powers of deduction could have seen early enough what direction things were going in..."

Thanks to his abilities, his investments were on point, of course. Rhodan had already noticed how single-mindedly and without hesitation the British man had pulled the strings in Australia. The wreck of the *Phoenix* had been salvaged without any problems and loaded onto a small freight machine. Like the two suits of Arkonide battledress, the damaged shells had lost a great deal of their value, but not all of it.

Adams had put it like this: "We're on the same side. It's about nothing less than the future. You must trust me, Rhodan. As I already said, my company sells hope. I trade in what is urgently needed. That's the only way to survive the dog-eat-dog rules of the world economy."

Rhodan had taken the hand that had been offered to him. He was no longer surprised by the firm grip of Adams's handshake.

Then there was the takeoff. Two intermediate landings, because the old freight plane had to refuel twice. During the flight, Bull had come together with two engineers provided by Adams and tried to work out how to make the *Phoenix* fly again. He would never forget their conversation.

"We'll raise the bird a second time from the ashes!"

"Because you like the name, Reg?"

"Because we won't let ourselves get beat! Hopefully we have enough screws on board..."

Rhodan remembered his silent nod. It was already clear to him that Bull would give it everything he had. In the end, his friend was bordering on physical collapse by the time they had landed in Arlington. The fact that Reg was already on his feet enjoying his

breakfast now proved his indestructible nature.

Rhodan himself had first spoken to Adams about everything in detail during the flight. They had only touched on the British man's past. He was convinced there was a great deal more to discover, possibly even things he might not like very much.

"Why not land here in Washington and make contact officially? Why the other side of the Moon? These beings are not to be trusted. That's what I say, and I have never been mistaken in such matters."

The interviewee stared into the camera. He was surrounded by dozens of bustling men and women. You could tell that they were not among the wealthy Americans, but at least they had some income. They represented the voice on the street, precisely what a few hundred million Americans wanted to see and hear on the Internet.

"You've never made a mistake, Mister... Really?"

"Frank. Frank Olders." The man rubbed his hand over his face, making it clear that he was wearing implants. Almost the entire right-hand side of his face was artificial, luckily made from a material that was very similar to his skin. The blank stare of his right eye was also now apparent. It was a good imitation. Rhodan couldn't tell whether the man had already had a chip implanted that transmitted a rough-grained, grayish image of his surroundings straight to his optic nerve.

Olders knocked against his cheek, several artificial nerves in the flesh reacted and turned his expression into a grimace.

"I knew what would happen when I got posted to South Africa, but I couldn't prevent it. A mine in Cape Town got me on the last day before my leave was to begin. The machine was already waiting on the runway to take off..."

"I don't see what that has to do with the murder trial against Crest." The reporter wanted to talk to other people, but Olders held him by the arm.

"It has a great deal to do with it!" the veteran called out hastily. "This is a souvenir from the damn war." He knocked on his cheek again. "But I'm glad that Congress approved the funds that gave me and a lot of my comrades back a halfway normal life again—for me, after three years of repeated surgery." Olders commanded attention by throwing up both his arms. "I tell everyone who wants to listen. The aliens will bring us a new war, and it will be much more brutal

than anything our nation has had to go through in the past decades. The trial against this...Crest...is the only right thing that we as adherents of democracy can do to prevent that. The aliens murdered the crew of our Moon base, as well as the Chinese and the Russians who were also there. Crest has to be sentenced, and the only punishment he deserves is the death penalty. Otherwise our country will never have peace."

Calls of agreement came from the crowd. Men and women surged forward, also wanting to tell their opinions to the camera. The reporter ignored them, and the camera was focused fully on a close-up of the veteran's patchwork face and artificial eye.

"There's another problem," the reporter remembered. "The astronauts who were on the Moon and brought Crest to Earth."

"That Rhodan?" Olders blurted out. "A second-rate test pilot from the Air Force who doesn't know what he's doing! If he hadn't torn the flag from his uniform, we would have had to do it for him. What's he, then? Nothing more than a ratcatcher whose madness risked the threat of an atomic world war. Deserted to the Gobi, although we have a number of salt lakes here in the USA. Maybe he did it in order to do the Arkonide's dirty work. I ask myself what Crest promised him as his thirty pieces of silver. Possibly half the universe..."

A few laughs could be heard from the crowd. But they weren't very convincing and sounded deeply depressed.

"A ratcatcher..." Bull looked intensely at Rhodan. "At least we finally know it."

"You should pay no attention to such opinions," Adams interjected. "The man is part of a hired crowd that will cheer as soon as the court finds Crest guilty. The entire thing is a show trial, and there are obviously a great many people who think it's a good thing."

"So that the world gets peace, and Drummond gets his alien, from whom he can coax all his technical secrets," Bull complained.

"Maybe Drummond even thinks we'll try to rescue Crest," Rhodan said. "And it's not only about him, there's also Eric and Dr. Haggard. They're the least to blame for this whole escapade. We have to try to help them." He snapped his fingers, and the acoustic sensor in the television reacted promptly and switched it off.

Adams smiled. "I thought you might do that."

"We're going to behave like criminals and rescue our friends

from the hands of the judiciary, and fast, just as you suggested yesterday, Mr. Adams. Now let's discuss the details again. Better once too often than to overlook something."

"Are you afraid, Rhodan, that you will have to storm the Supreme Court in your own useless combat dress?"

The astronaut nodded thoughtfully. "If I knew what became of Flipper... His suit could help us."

"We've hit rock bottom anyway," Bull said. "It can't get any lower than this. So what the hell, let's sell the rest of our morale for a cheap sliver of hope."

3.

Washington, DC,
11:30 a.m.

The darkness had a thousand faces, and a face bringing death could be hiding behind every corner of the wall...

He had long since come to hate the oppressive atmosphere between the old walls in which the only noise seemed to be the sounds of his own wheezy breathing. Although the stuffy air in his lungs burned, he could not adjust his breathing—not before the next mine blew up in his face or before the bullets of the rebels made holes in him.

The rooms were filled with heavy smoke. And then there was the stink of burnt flesh and powder. It smelled like death. He held the Mossberg 500 close to his side. His index finger was on the trigger, and a nervous twitch would be enough to fire the thing.

The clatter of a fully automatic weapon could be heard coming from the other side of the road, followed by the dull boom of exploding hand grenades. After that, everything was quiet again, and he could sense the helplessness and powerlessness that hung like a curse in the air all over this godless country.

He advanced. Mechanically, like a robot that had been programmed to shoot faster than the bastards who were lying in wait for him. Those who would stop at nothing, who used children for their own purposes, and who were responsible for making the smallest and weakest the victims in this dirty war.

The loud boom of a heavy explosion could be heard from the direction of the city center. Probably a car bomb. He bit his lower lip and for the first time felt disgusted by the taste of his own warm blood.

The corridor was full of trash, and he heard glass breaking beneath the soles of his boots. The splintering sound seemed unbearably loud to him in this nocturnal world of grayish shadows. All that helped him find his way through the darkness was the

residual light left on his gun sight.

He could see the silhouette of a stairway ahead of him. The banister was nothing but splintered posts, and the door in the background had been torn out. There was bare brickwork everywhere.

Instructions came through a tiny receiver in his ear. But he could hardly understand what they were saying.

The heat was unbearable, like everything in this country. Even now, at night, it had only become a few degrees cooler. He was stewing in his own juices, and he cursed the heavy bulletproof suit he was wearing and the helmet that felt like it was squeezing his brain out of his head.

He counted to three. A slight hesitation after two and the sudden hope that it would all end if he refused to continue counting. And yet, despite that: three!

He didn't want to, but he hastened on, his rifle at the ready, and prepared to fire everything he had if he noticed even the slightest movement.

Moments later he was standing in the stairwell of the dilapidated house somewhere on the edges of Baghdad. The city of the caliphs he had often dreamed about when he was a teenager had long since become a nightmare. There was a bright flare, and the fingerlike beams of searchlights shone through the night, seeking. The Mossberg 500 spat fire, but the bullets only hammered into the clay bricks of the wall.

He turned in a split second, checking the top of the stairs, but nobody seemed to be there. He carefully climbed up the first steps. His goggles showed him his comrades coming up behind. One of them lifted the barrel of his gun to signalize that they wanted to keep going and that he should remain by the stairs. No objection to that. He tried to breathe calmly, although his pulse was racing.

There was nobody above him. The enemy had pulled back, they —

He was suddenly blinded by a bright flash of light. The thunderous explosion was unbearably loud, and at that very same moment the wall in front of him was torn apart. He saw the bricks burst as if in slow motion before they sank into a cloud of fire and dust. The blast whirled him around as he hit the ground hard and instinctively rolled. He did not want to wait until the enemy came again and finished him off. His Mossberg spat out its ammunition,

but the bullets only tore apart wall hangings and the very cheap furniture.

The voice in his ear was there again. “They must be pretty close! Can you hear me?”

“...can you hear what I’m saying, Clifford? They’re in the city. I can hear their voices, even if they’re still pretty hazy.”

He needed seconds to come back to his senses and suppress the dreadful memories that came over him every now and then. This was no longer Baghdad, which he had only survived by the skin of his teeth. With a deformed face and psi powers he would not understand until years later. This was Washington, DC; he was in safety at the heart of the United States. Exactly twenty-nine years after his terrible time in Iraq, even if the madness from those days had probably become even worse.

“They’re here!” Tatiana repeated emphatically. “Rhodan and Bull!”

“Near the Supreme Court Building?”

Monterny stroked both hands over the Arkonide battledress, which he had now put on in full. Its weight came mainly from the energy pack. As soon as he activated the anti-grav setting, he would hardly notice it.

Deegan was just closing the helmet of his suit, and the transparent foil folded without a sound. The young man, just turned twenty and rather pale and weak-looking, felt like Superman in this technical miracle. Monterny did not like his triumphant grin, but he needed Roster Deegan and his strong telekinetic powers. Indeed, the young man was vital to his plan.

“I can only sense them very weakly,” Tatiana answered. “Like a light breeze. They’re there, but that’s all I know—somewhere in the city. But don’t ask me where they are or what they’re planning.”

“Are they alone?”

She was concentrating, which was obvious from the way her body tensed up in her seat. Her face had reddened and was gleaming with sweat. She was looking at Monterny but was no longer aware of his presence; she was looking right through him, searching once again for the thoughts of the astronauts.

Down in the courtroom, Eric Manoli, the *Stardust*’s on-board physician, was on the witness stand. Monterny didn’t know for sure, but he was fairly certain the trial was being influenced. Crest was

too important for the country.

"You, Dr. Manoli, of all the astronauts on board the *Stardust*, got to know the accused best," the presiding judge stated. "I assume you already examined and treated him on the Moon."

"On board the *Aetron*," the ship's doctor answered. "Everyone here at the Supreme Court should have seen the huge Arkonide ship. Then this trial wouldn't be happening and Crest would be getting treated in a way fit for an ambassador..."

"That's enough, Dr. Manoli! I maintain that you have been influenced in the same way Mr. Rhodan and Bull were. What did the Arkonides do with you on board this spaceship?"

"Nothing!" Manoli answered emphatically.

"We have the means to uncover brainwashing. Were you given drugs by the aliens, Dr. Manoli?"

"I am in possession of my full mental capacities."

A collective murmur went through the courtroom. Monterny asked himself whether this was an unexpected attempt to rehabilitate Rhodan and Bull as deserters. What they had done smeared the image of the United States. It was absolutely clear that's what the president believed, and while certain things could not be allowed to stand, the Arkonide had to be given the blame for it. More evidence of the integrity of the United States of America. The aliens had manipulated their astronauts' minds. The relief people would feel if that turned out to be true was something tangible to Monterny among those gathered in the courtroom.

But it was all the same to him. For the past four weeks, everyone had been playing according to their own rules. And Monterny himself had been pulling no punches since he had found out why the Arkonide had come to their solar system.

"I can't tell whether Rhodan and Bull are alone," Tatiana said.

Monterny reacted with a disparaging gesture of the hand. "Who's going to help two deserters? Only those who live in the past and still believe despite everything that their nonsense can change the world. Nothing but hot air, Tatiana. These people have had enough time to put their ideas into practice. Nothing has happened."

"Clifford is only waiting for Rhodan to finally turn up so that he can free Crest from the hands of the court." Deegan smiled in amusement. "And then, bam!" He clapped his hands together as if trying to get rid of an annoying insect.

Of course, that's exactly what Monterny was waiting for. If Rhodan and Bull came, he would have a chance to realize his own plan. He had left the old order behind him. His home country, Homeland Security, and even President Stanley Drummond—what did they have to offer him that could compare with eternal life?

"Nothing," he murmured silently to himself, making an effort to hide his thoughts from the telepath.

She looked at him with a confused expression. As usual, she had failed to read his thoughts, but had she intuitively sensed what he was intending to do?

It didn't matter. He assumed the price for eternal life would be high. Everything had its price; that's the way it had always been. He could never value immortality enough, because he knew death. He had seen too many comrades die from their terrible wounds, had brought them to the threshold. He had felt the presence of death.

What could be more tempting than the prospect of immortality? Monterny would have sold his mother for the chance, of that he was certain. Drummond did not know what opportunity fate had given him by giving him Crest. Opportunities like that only existed once and for a short time, and very likely never came again.

4.

July 14, 2036,
Early afternoon

"Give me your hand, Mr. Rhodan. You too, Mr. Bull!"

These words all but sprang into Perry Rhodan's mind as, all of a sudden, a large, athletic figure appeared out of nowhere beside him. Tschubai had materialized in the middle of the living and dining room—a thing that was absolutely baffling to human understanding.

Rhodan felt a shudder run through his entire body. How did Tschubai manage to move himself from one place to another? Was it merely the power of the mind? Of course. But what was different in this man's brain? What freak of nature had equipped him with these powers? And Tschubai was not alone, if Adams had been telling the truth when he intimated that there were others.

"Give me your hand, Mr. Rhodan..."

He had heard this sentence the evening before, just as it was coming up on ten o'clock in the evening, after the freight machine had rolled out, and the engines were still causing a huge racket. The runway lighting had already been replaced by the bright terminal lighting. Several large machines had been landing with only brief intervals between, and there was a great deal going on at the airport.

Adams's plane came to a standstill, and Rhodan saw several luggage wagons rolling by. Empty passenger buses were parked in rows, and two vehicles from the airport fire service rushed by with their warning lights flashing.

"...and you too, Mr. Bull!"

Bull didn't hesitate and grasped the hand he had been offered—so tightly that Tschubai grimaced. Rhodan thought he could feel the Sudanese man twitching.

Then they were in darkness. The roar of the engines had suddenly stopped, to be replaced by the barely perceivable hum of a

powerful electric motor. A closed, boxlike vehicle, presumably a delivery truck.

"You can let go of my hand now," they heard Tschubai say. He was obviously referring to Bull, because Rhodan had withdrawn his own hand.

"It stinks like dead fish in here!" Bull said, checking out their new surroundings. "I hope we haven't landed inside a mountain of rotting cephalopods."

"Don't you like squid?" Tschubai asked. "Deep-sea fishing is something the oceans still provide in profitable amounts."

"I don't have problems with individual examples, but I'm not so sure about large quantities," Bull complained. "You should have told me we were being brought on land beneath a mountain of slimy calamari."

"Catering service," the Sudanese man said quietly. "Everything hygienic, fresh, and well-packed."

The van shuddered twice, no doubt caused by traffic bumps designed to make them drive more slowly. The vehicle approached an airport exit point.

"Controls," Tschubai whispered.

Rhodan felt his arm being touched...

...and then found himself in a washroom with Bull and the teleporter.

"Don't worry." Tschubai grinned widely, exposing two rows of perfect white teeth. "Adams's people have made sure this room remains inaccessible for a short time. We are no more than sixty meters from the delivery truck; we just have to make sure we get our timing right."

He looked at his watch. The stopwatch function was counting backwards.

"The woman driving us will get into a conversation with the controllers if they finish their checks too fast."

There was one minute and forty seconds left, Rhodan could see. Then he felt Tschubai's hand again...and the smell of fish was back.

They drove through stop-and-go traffic for a good forty minutes. Then someone gave a signal by knocking from up front. It was clear they had reached their goal. Homer G. Adams had promised they could enjoy a quiet night and that everything would be ready by the next day.

Even though Rhodan had sworn to pay attention to the next

teleportation process, he was aware of nothing when Tschubai delivered them to their quarters. The last thing he remembered was the darkness in the truck, and a fraction of a second later they were in their new surroundings. That was it. He would have needed an extremely high-speed camera to see how the process worked.

The Sudanese man was now standing in front of him again, and Rhodan did not waste any more time thinking about recording. Instead he thought of Crest and how much the Arkonide could mean for humanity.

"Please give me your hand, Mr. Rhodan!" the teleporter said. "You too, Mr. Bull."

Their surroundings changed abruptly.

"Damn," Reginald Bull cursed. "Adams said nothing about that. Squeezing our *Phoenix* into a...a..." He sought in vain to find the right word.

"Into a top-notch giga-truck!" a voice behind him remarked.

"A shoebox, more like!"

Bull turned on his heel. He looked a little pinched; the partially healed wounds on his face and forehead, which still had scabs on them and were an unnecessary souvenir from the *Stardust* crash, tightened.

"Okay, then," he said, but his anger was soon gone. "Trying to sell a shoebox as a giga-truck, that's something only a—"

"A woman?" the other voice responded. "Nonsense. I don't like prejudices. In fact, I hate them."

"Me too," Reginald replied with a curt nod of his head. "But the *Phoenix* doesn't deserve to be squeezed in like that. If we need to take off, everything will break."

"I don't believe that," the woman contradicted him.

Bull studied her. She seemed older than he was, but he could have been mistaken. It could be her dirty overalls just gave that impression, although a few small wrinkles had already settled in her face.

She seemed to be strong, and in a way that was hard to define, she was also attractive. The lubricating oil beneath her fingernails didn't bother Bull. The only thing that didn't really fit in with her general appearance was her short, elegantly styled hair, something that was absolutely necessary for their mission to the courtroom, assuming she was going to swap her overalls for more suitable

attire. At the moment, she looked like a woman who was getting ready to go out to a dress affair but had been forced to change a broken shock absorber beforehand.

"I take it you're Iga. Adams spoke about you."

"And you are Reginald Bull, if I'm not mistaken. One of the crazy men who brought the aliens to our doorstep."

"That's only partially true," Rhodan corrected her. "We might be crazy, but the Arkonides were already on the Moon when we arrived."

"Splitting hairs." The woman examined him from head to toe and nodded reluctantly. "So, you're Perry Rhodan. Nice to meet you, or not, as the case may be. This nonsensical chatter about aliens, it was as far away to me as...well, as the Moon. Made-up stories so that people didn't get too cocky."

"But now you know better, ma'am?"

She shrugged. "We work together. Allan asked me, which is why I'm helping. And also because, in the meanwhile, some things..." She bit her tongue, as she wasn't quite sure how freely she could speak.

"Make you feel sick?" Bull asked. She nodded. "We feel exactly the same way, Iga. Do you have a surname? Adams didn't mention it."

"Tulodziecki."

Bull gave her a wide smile. "Okay, I think I'll just stick with Iga."

She turned back to Rhodan. "I'm not used to being addressed as ma'am. We truckers don't think much of polite forms of address."

"Where did Tschubai disappear to?" Bull asked. "I thought he went to get Adams."

"I thought so too." The woman held up both hands as if she wanted to keep out of it. "By the way, Reginald, I took a look at your leasing truck. If I tell you that the *Phoenix* can be out in nineteen seconds without any damage, then you can believe me. And you won't even have to use a shoehorn. We worked all night on it."

Bull said nothing. He inspected the ship he had screwed together with his own hands after the *Stardust* had crashed. Its main feature was the Arkonide propulsion unit that Crest had built into the ship. It had survived the crash and operated autonomously. Adjustable hoppers controlled and measured the thrust. The braced

spider legs had been arranged as close as possible to the central element. The jets and tanks did not hinder this. They were the most important features, along with the pilot's and co-pilot's seats, with the steering tools as the construction's main components. The damage suffered by the *Phoenix* during its crash landing on the Australian coastline was nothing serious and had already been repaired.

The entire structure was an improvised one, and it didn't have a thrust neutralizer, anti-grav, or energy shield. Anyone flying it was exposed without protection to external elements. But the Arkonide drive allowed the makeshift ship to be accelerated and maneuvered in a way that far outstripped anything Earthly technology had to offer.

"Is that everything?" Iga asked.

Bull slapped the palm of his hand on the angled landing legs. "I still see a problem. We'll have to get as close as possible to the Supreme Court Building. It's not only that we'll raise suspicion by turning up right outside the court with a monster truck, but nobody will believe we're a party service unless we were serving at a baseball stadium."

"Allan and Mr. Adams already thought about that."

Iga worked on the remote control, which looked like the control unit for a loading crane. Part of the trailer's inner cladding slid aside to reveal a monitor. The visual perspective it gave took some getting used to. From a height of several meters, it offered a very slanted side view of the truck.

Night & Day Catering. The lettering could be seen in brightly colored capitals across the side of the vehicle.

"Even so," Rhodan objected. "It isn't suitable. A giga-truck outside the Supreme Court will set off the terror alarm. Homeland Security has a reputation of shooting first and asking questions later."

"If they even ask questions at all," Bull added.

"Tschubai's powers have certain limitations," Rhodan continued. "A maximum of two hundred meters, Adams told us. A teleportation across this distance means he has to take a longer break to regenerate afterwards."

"I was told that as well," Iga answered. She obviously wanted to say something else, but remained silent as Tschubai and Adams had materialized.

“I see you’ve already met,” Adams said. “Excuse me for coming late. I spoke with Mercant and Pounder; they’re already gone again and will take up position in due time.”

“So, can we get going?” Iga asked.

“Pounder?” Rhodan and Bull asked, almost in unison. Rhodan was perhaps a tiny bit faster with his question. “Lesly Pounder, the flight director of NASA? What does he, of all people, have to do with our plan? And we don’t know anything about Mercant, except for the fact that he was with you as an initiator of the mission to free us.”

“The two of them are our insurance to carry out our plan undisturbed. Allan Mercant? Well, until recently, he was closely associated with Homeland Security. But he’s now on our side.”

“Are you sure about that?” Bull asked.

“Absolutely!” Iga said vehemently before Adams could answer.

“And what does this ‘insurance’ look like?” Rhodan asked with a little more composure than his companion.

“Let me have one little secret for myself,” the older man said. “You can’t reveal something by accident if you don’t know it in the first place.”

“I think you’ll find we have ourselves perfectly under control in that respect,” Bull protested. But he said no more when Adams made it clear the discussion was over.

“I don’t know whether Drummond has telepaths at his disposal. But I have to assume that may be the case and adjust our security measures accordingly—to the extent it is even possible.”

“If I catch one of them sniffing around my thoughts, I’ll wring his neck with my bare hands.” The veins on Bull’s temples swelled. “What have we gotten ourselves into?” he complained. “If this is the brave new world we’re living in...”

“I’ll drive,” Iga had said as she climbed off the trailer more than an hour earlier. Since then, the truck had been rolling in an easterly direction through traffic that was getting busier all the time.

“Our timing is good so far,” Adams confirmed. “My people have been supplying the Supreme Court for four years and have never been late once. Reliability in business pays off.”

“Today will still be your last catering trip,” Bull remarked.

“That’s a loss I can survive. Who knows? Perhaps times will change and the Supreme Court will soon be upgraded to become

the Terranian court of law. After that, Night & Day Catering should be back in business pretty fast. And just to make sure in case anyone is worried, not even Homeland Security would be able to dig up a link between the catering company and the General Cosmic Company."

"So you're considering the possibility that our mission to rescue Crest could fail?" Rhodan asked.

Adams responded to the astronaut with an inquisitive look. "What could go wrong?"

The four men were sitting on folded-down seats. The view of the outside showed them that the truck had just crossed a bridge over the Potomac. The traffic was slowing down.

"We'll be there soon."

Adams stood up and had to grab hold of something for support as the vehicle swayed. They heard the muffled sound of screeching brakes and the horn tooting.

Moments later, he was already working at the lift gate that divided the trailer. Rhodan thought he now knew what was concealed behind the divider. He also noticed Bull examining the barrier curiously.

Adams released several steel pins before he was able to open the lateral part of the wall. The separate rear section of the trailer was unlit.

"I assume, Mr. Rhodan, Mr. Bull, that you already have some idea of what awaits you here."

"A highly polished delivery truck from Night & Day Catering," Bull replied.

Rhodan added, "Not only a delivery truck, but precisely the vehicle that regularly delivers to the court building. Using what is familiar will help against the increased security measures."

"I expected nothing less of you." Adams nodded, satisfied. "The vehicle has, of course, a few added components. The controls when entering the court building today will be considerably tighter than usual. Iga found that out yesterday."

"And if our coup goes wrong?" Bull interjected.

"Ras Tschubai will teleport to safety with Mr. Rhodan."

"As long as everything remains within a two-hundred-meter radius," Bull added.

Adams nodded briefly. "That's a problem we have to bear in mind. However, if we have any reservations, Iga and Tschubai can

also free Crest on their own. You, Mr. Bull, and you even more so, Mr. Rhodan, are the leading figures in the world revolution. At least, that's the way I see it. It would be disastrous if..."

"Revolution sounds like uprising and armed violence to me," Rhodan said. "That's not my style."

"But that's the direction things are going in."

Perry balled his hands into fists, opened them again, and nervously wiped his lips with the back of his hands. "There's been too much suffering already," he protested.

"The Chinese soldiers who were killed by Thora using the cannons on the auxiliary craft..." Adams remarked.

"Thora overreacted. She was attacked and hit back hard. Maybe she had to. We know nothing about the ethics and morals of the Arkonides and absolutely nothing about the potential dangers they're exposed to on their home planet."

"Who knows, perhaps the Milky Way is one big battlefield," Tschubai observed.

Rhodan looked at the teleporter, trying to assess him. "I hope not," he said. "We base things on the way we think as humans. But people who have the knowledge and technology to travel faster than light are presumably above war and destruction."

"Thora's fiery blast in the Gobi would seem to suggest otherwise. The destroyed Moon bases are also clear evidence to the contrary."

"I know."

Admitting that was difficult for Rhodan. Would he have become an astronaut and flown to the Moon if he had not been driven by an insatiable longing? The same longing that made bold adventurers sail westwards from Europe in floating nutshells more than five hundred years ago seeking a new route to India. The men who accompanied Christopher Columbus did find something—the continent of America.

But then? Untold suffering. Countless deaths caused by hardship, disease, and fighting between the indigenous peoples and the Spaniards. Burning land. Huge herds of bison slaughtered. The same fate that was suffered by many native populations.

"Why are you supporting us, Mr. Adams?" The question had been on Rhodan's mind since Australia. And the time had come to ask it out loud. "You are a rich and respected man; I hardly think you have to worry about the world's problems."

“My life wasn’t always like this,” Adams said reluctantly.

“Why are you supporting us?” Rhodan repeated.

The older man nodded thoughtfully. “A good question,” he said. “Indeed, the ‘why’ is a very good question. Perhaps because I have dreams and longings similar to your own, Mr. Rhodan. Because humanity would not be where it is today without dreams.”

“One step away from the abyss!” Reginald Bull commented dryly.

“Or on the threshold of a new age,” Adams countered. “Do you doubt yourself?”

“No!” Rhodan answered firmly. Bull shook his head silently.

“We’ll be reaching the waiting area in a couple of minutes!” Tschubai called out from the other side of the separating wall.

Bull took down a light that was hanging on the wall and lit up the inside of the delivery truck. “Where is Perry’s hiding place?” he wanted to know.

Adams showed it to the two astronauts. It was a space just under eighty-by-eighty centimeters, separated off behind the driver’s cabin of the delivery truck. The narrow space would never be noticed unless somebody was deliberately looking for it. A narrow access point into the space opened when Adams pulled aside a rack.

“That wasn’t just added recently,” Rhodan said straight out.

“Correct,” Adams admitted. “The hiding space already proved its worth in another matter. Nothing illegal, however. With Crest, the situation is a little different...” He looked thoughtfully at Rhodan. “Everyone involved agreed from the very beginning that the Arkonide must not be convicted as a murderer.”

“Everyone?” Rhodan counted the number of people on his fingers. “There’s you, Mr. Adams. Apart from you, Lesly Pounder and the former Homeland Security guy, Mercant. Or are there others? A secret society for rescuing extraterrestrials?”

“Let’s just say a partnership of convenience, which has come together because each of us is aware that we find ourselves at a historical turning point. And that we humans have been given an opportunity that we must do our best not to gamble away. An undeserved opportunity, if truth be told.”

Bull clicked his tongue, drawing Rhodan’s attention. He had taken a look around the hiding space and knocked on the cladding.

“What’s here? A transparent plastic covering, and beneath

that..."

"Lead," Adams said.

"What for?" Bull blurted out. "It can hardly be to protect against radiation, can it?"

"Merely a precaution. To protect Mr. Rhodan. A new kind of cavity resonator has been in use for months now, mainly used by Homeland Security. The lead cladding means the space cannot be detected."

"I think I'm beginning to know you much better, Mr. Adams," Rhodan said. "You are certain that the president is expecting me to turn up, aren't you? Of course, Crest sentenced and the traitors Rhodan and Bull finally under lock and key. That would be exactly what Drummond needs to guarantee reelection."

"That might be what he's thinking. I certainly can't rule it out. I would even understand if you don't want to take the risk."

Rhodan shook his head lightly, and Adams stopped mid-sentence.

"Do you think we've risked everything for me to give up now? The Arkonides are proof of the fact that there is life elsewhere, not only on Earth. Proof that we are not the center of all creation. Some people will finally have to concede that our home planet is just a grain of sand in the universe. If we want to have a future, we can no longer think and act as Americans, Chinese, or Germans. We must join forces as Terranians."

"It will be a long time before all human beings understand that," Adams answered.

"Is it really that difficult? I believe eight billion people are capable of learning." Rhodan stared at the older British man with an inquiring look before drawing a symbolic line with a gesture of the hand. "Crest is the last surviving Arkonide in the solar system. He knows and trusts me."

"Hey!" Bull loudly.

"He trusts both of us," Rhodan corrected himself. "Of course, I have no doubt your teleporter can get him out of the courtroom on his own. But, nevertheless, I ask myself how fast the guards will react and how loose their weapons will be. An electric shock from close up could knock Tschubai out. An additional diversion that draws everyone's attention may give him the extra seconds he needs."

Adams nodded reluctantly. "I certainly understand why you're

insisting on being personally involved in the operation. But being trusted by Crest is just a little too thin as justification. Do you want to speak to people? Good. Two Internet teams have been admitted to the Supreme Court, and the recording is being transmitted worldwide via satellite. To be honest, I am interested in finding out how long the director will take to edit everything."

5.

Washington, DC,
10:45 a.m.

"Get out of the way!" Iga shouted angrily. "Move, you idiots! Can't you see that I—" She thumped the horn with the side of her fist. Honking loudly, the truck was stuck in the crowd, unable to move.

"Was it this bad yesterday?" Ras Tschubai was sitting in the passenger seat. Waving with both hands, he was trying to get the demonstrators, who were blocking the road with their banners, to move aside.

A bald man with a goatee looked up at him, shook his head, and made an impolite gesture.

"Same to you!" Iga snorted at him as she revved the engine, trying to be loud. "I know why I don't like these electric vehicles," she complained. "It used to be possible to really make the engine roar. But nowadays?"

Tschubai opened the side window a few centimeters. "Hey, Jack!" he called out to the bald man. "We have to get through, otherwise they'll be starving in the court. Just a few steps to the side would be enough. After that, you can do whatever you want."

The man did not respond.

"Jack!" Tschubai got louder. "Let us through, and then you can protest against anything you like."

"Jack?" The guy he was talking to turned around. With narrowed eyes, he examined the delivery truck and the two people behind the windshield. "My name's not Jack."

"Then Jim or whatever. We need to get through!"

The bald man pulled a face. "Do you really think I'm going to let myself be ordered around by some Black guy and his white whore?"

Tschubai took a deep breath. "Please!"

The man, who wasn't even one of the worst in the crowd, spat

out at him. “A grown man begging and grovelling. You make me sick. Go to hell and leave the people here who have something important to say in peace.” He thumped the side of the truck with his fist.

“If you’re looking for a fight, come here!” Iga yelled. “But I bet you’re crapping yourself already.”

He glared at her angrily. “First I’m gonna get your pal, and then I’m coming for you! Hey, where’d he go?” He stared at the empty passenger seat, aghast.

Iga lifted both her hands. “Who?” she yelled, competing with the ever noisier chants. “Who are you talking about?”

“Your pal! He can’t have just vanished into thin air.”

The man tried to stand on the fender, but Iga let the transporter roll forward. She managed to gain about twenty centimeters before she had to stop again. The bald man was shaking the locked passenger door, now able to look into the cabin from the step he was standing on.

“I’m alone. I’ve been alone all the time!” Iga yelled. “That’s why I think you’re...” She pointed a finger to her forehead, then thumped the horn again, and then let the truck roll forward a little before braking abruptly. When she looked up, the guy on her right-hand side was gone. She was stuck with the catering delivery in the crowd, with no hope of moving forward and no way of going back. Thousands of demonstrators had unrolled banners and were marching down Second Street.

“Citizens of Washington,” the voice was yelling through the loudspeakers. “The end of the world is nigh! Repent and prepare for the world to sink into a ball of fire. The day or hour, no one knows, but revenge shall be mine, said the Lord.”

There was a loud knock on the side window. The face of a devil with red flashing horns was staring at Iga. The mask-wearer pressed a poster against the window. *The Antichrist has come into the world. The Apocalypse began in the Gobi Desert,* she read.

A gentle breeze distracted her, and she turned around. Tschubai was back.

“Where were you?”

“The police are standing two streets down.”

“Not bad.” A grin flashed across her face as she tapped the display with her finger. She rushed through the menu until she got the radio of the Metropolitan Police.

“Justitia Omnibus,” Iga read, half to herself. “Justice For All. District of Columbia.” Then the transmission was interrupted.

You’re crazy! Tschubai’s look said when the teleporter realized what she was going to do. Iga just waved her hand at him.

A master patrol officer responded. She didn’t understand his name, but that wasn’t important.

“Night & Day Catering, Melinda Abeltree,” Iga said. “I’m sorry, Officer, I have the usual catering delivery for the Supreme Court on board, but I’m stuck in a demonstration. I don’t know whether President Drummond is willing to wait for the ordered goods, but the presiding judge and the associate judge...”

“Where are you, Miss Abeltree?”

“Mrs.,” she corrected him and winked at Tschubai. “My colleague and I are stuck on Second Street, and we can already see the Madison Building from here. It would be great if someone could guide us to the Supreme Court. It’s coming up on their lunch break.”

“I can see several cruisers near your position, ma’am. Could you just wait a few minutes?”

“I’m not going anywhere without your help,” Iga sighed. “Thank you, Officer!”

The department disconnected. She saw Tschubai wiping sweat from his forehead. He looked at her from the side.

“I hope you know what you’re doing. Rhodan and Bull—”

“Who?” she asked, irritated.

“Rhodan and...” Tschubai understood. “Okay, I’ve never seen them. And when I think of them, it’s only in connection with news reports from China or the Moon.”

“Don’t overdo it! That’s even more conspicuous.”

“You can talk...”

They heard the sound of sirens coming along the road. Three of the white police cruisers with red and blue stripes on them were drawing closer, and finally the demonstrators started moving.

Two of the cruisers stopped. The officers got out and approached the truck. A few meters in front of them, the crowd was chanting. One of the policemen knocked on the side window, and Iga opened it.

“We won’t make much progress continuing in this direction,” the man said. “But you’ll be able to reverse in a minute.”

“Thank you, Sergeant!” Iga replied after checking the rank

displayed on his uniform.

"No problem. Are there two of you?"

"We're in charge of delivery, offloading, and serving. Full service."

"Open the loading space!" the policeman said, nodding at the lettering on the side.

When Iga got out, she pressed two printed sheets into the Sergeant's hand. They had text and pictures. "Today's delivery, of the finest quality in line with the occasion."

He looked at them only briefly. "And what about us on the front line?"

"You get hot dogs or cheeseburgers," Iga told him. "I would love to give you something, but unfortunately, everything's been counted."

She opened the rear door. The policeman took a quick look inside.

"Okay. Reverse, ma'am. A vehicle will be accompanying you to the court."

"To the delivery entrance, please."

Anyone with any knowledge of the civil wars that plagued the torn continent of Africa could quite easily guess that Ras Tschubai came from or close to Sudan from his dark, rich skin tone. But at the moment, that might not have been so easy. He had paled somewhat, even looked a little ashen. He sat in the passenger seat without saying a word and stared rigidly out of the windshield. And yet he would be the first to get out of any risky situation safely, Iga thought to herself.

They reached the entrance to the court building. The police cruiser drove to the right, and Iga maneuvered the truck slowly past it. She waved in thanks and turned towards the ramp. When she was almost forty meters from the guardhouse, she smiled again. The man on duty doing the controls had been there yesterday and already knew her.

She stopped and waited for him to come to the driver's door.

"You're late," he said.

"An Armageddon sect is already practicing, and its followers are blocking the road. I asked the DC Police Force for assistance, otherwise it wouldn't be looking too good for our delivery."

"So I noticed. What do you have on board?"

“Same as yesterday: entrées, three-course menu. Only the cake buffet has been changed, in line with the president’s wishes.”

The guard waved his hand. He gestured towards Tschubai. “A new guy? Where’s the one from yesterday?”

“Changes to the roster.” Iga rubbed her neck. “Every day is different, depending on who’s needed. I have this tour this week and next; after that, I’m scheduled for the UNO in New York.” She glanced at her watch. “Damn, we’re really running late today.”

The guard shrugged. “The sprinter isn’t in the right position. Drive another two meters for the undercarriage check, and open up the back.”

The paved entrance didn’t reveal where measuring devices and sensors were concealed. But Iga knew where they were anyway, as Allan had told her.

“Is that okay?” she called out to the guard after she had let the truck roll forward a little.

“That’s fine.”

She got out.

“Different vehicle than yesterday,” he remarked and rubbed his hand over a small scrape on the back door.

“It’s the same story as with the staff,” Iga responded. She was secretly relieved that they had decided not to swap the plates. She had driven an identical truck the day before, except for the built-in hiding space.

The man held a tubular device in the cargo area and moved it slowly from one side to the other. Then he climbed in and walked bent over to the front.

“And?” Iga asked. “We use only the freshest produce.”

He looked at her inquiringly. “Well, there are no explosives on board. The plastic stuff from the Arab countries is highly charged and can be pressed into any shape you want. You think you have an apple in your hand and then, when you bite into it: boom.”

“Ouch.” Iga brought her hand to her mouth. “Does that really exist?”

He laughed. “Drive on!”

The driveway was a tight spiral. You could see that it had been rebuilt several times. Even the Supreme Court of the United States was no longer as prestigious as it once had been. While the front with the columns looked pristine, the area at the rear clearly

showed the lack of financial means. The 2028 hurricane season had badly hit the country's already stagnating economy—a hit it had still not fully recovered from.

They reached the loading bay. Crumbling concrete, faded colors, even the road markings were weather-beaten. Suddenly, there was a barrier that hadn't been there the day before. A man in a uniform waved to Iga. He seemed impatient, which she was now becoming as well. The Marines always made her nervous. The soldiers were apparently standing around bored, but the machine guns in the crooks of their arms said otherwise.

"Why did Allan not mention this?"

Tschubai remained silent. What was there to say?

Iga clenched her teeth. Time was passing, and Allan's message should be arriving any minute now, telling her that he had taken up position with Pounder. After that, it would only be another quarter hour before things got going.

"Get out, both of you!"

"But..." She complied when she saw the stern expression but still nodded to Tschubai. He would hopefully sense when to react.

"We're expected," Iga said. "Catering service. And we're already late. We were subject to normal controls yesterday."

"Today is different."

"How so?"

"We're expecting Rhodan."

"The astronaut?" Iga shuddered. "I thought Rhodan and his deserters were in custody in China."

"Doesn't look like it." The soldier smiled in an unpleasant manner. "To be honest, it would be pretty stupid of them to try and come to Washington."

"Well..."

The Marine pointed towards the delivery truck with the barrel of his gun. Two others opened the cargo area and disappeared inside.

"Don't make a mess in there," Iga said.

"Orders from above."

Two minutes passed at most, and then the soldiers climbed back out of the truck.

"Negative!" they reported. "The measuring devices show nothing."

Iga looked at the man opposite her in such surprise that the

officer laughed. “A scan to detect biological activity,” he explained. “There could be somebody hiding in the icebox.”

It was tight. And dark. Perry Rhodan sat on the floor with his back against the wall, his legs bent up. He made an effort to breathe evenly and ban all dark thoughts from his mind, which was easier said than done. When he’d returned from the Moon, he had felt like a winner and believed he would be able to convince people quickly.

“The trouble is you want things to go too fast,” Reg had warned him. “But people aren’t ready for this.”

“A few diehards might not be ready,” he had told his friend. “But the rest are longing for a better future.”

“Believe me, Perry, it’s going to be a long and painful process. We humans are creatures of habit. Anything new is first looked at with a critical eye and prejudged. Just look at the forums on the Internet.”

“You’re not being serious, are you?”

Bull’s silence had said it all. They hadn’t discussed the topic since.

The delivery truck stopped. Then moved on. Braked again. Muffled loudspeaker voices could be heard outside. Then they advanced a few meters again.

“The last days are upon us,” Rhodan heard a striking voice say. “I’m telling you, this world will cease to exist, because the time to reap has come. The fruit of the earth is ripe, the planet will be harvested...”

In the battledress, he felt like a football player long after the match was over, wedged in and awkward. The clothes that Adams had obtained for them in Australia would have been enough. But no, he had to make an impression when he appeared before the Supreme Court.

Adams had given him a pod, supposedly a secure line. He heard Bull through the earbuds.

“We’ve lost the game, Perry, but we’re too stubborn to admit it. What do we have to show for ourselves?”

“Crest.”

“Drummond has him, Perry. Drummond. Do you want me to spell the name for you?”

“That’s not necessary.”

“Oh, the gentleman feels he’s being wrongfully attacked, does

he? Our hands are empty. Like in that fairy tale, *Hans in Luck*. The *Aetron* would have earned us some respect, but she's done for, man, mouse, and robot. Drummond sent a team to the Moon without someone who looked beyond the confines of the orders he'd been given. And the *Stardust*? Gone. The *Phoenix* isn't exactly a technical showpiece. And what about our base in the Gobi, which we ambitiously called 'Terrania'? It could have been nice, but unfortunately the construction ground was too sandy, and the neighbors didn't want us."

Rhodan said nothing.

"Don't you have anything to say about all that?" Bull asked him vehemently.

"Yes, I do. Are you finished with your list?"

His friend could be heard on the other end, gasping for breath. "Thora could have been our trump card," he finally said, noticeably calmer. "But, like everyone else, she's a regrettable victim of Drummond's fear for his own existence. I at least have to give him one thing: it was a clean bomb without radioactive fallout. In that respect, the Chinese also gave it all they had. It's a wonder Crest is even still alive. Maybe Drummond's taken a liking to him and understands the Arkonides are more technically advanced than we are."

They could hear sirens going off. The sound came closer and then remained constant.

"You have to admit," Bull sniffed. "He found out fast where to find you. Should I come and get you out of there?"

Bull obviously had excessively high expectations of the president. The delivery truck started moving again. The fact that the piercing sound of the sirens remained intimated that the police cars were accompanying the vehicle.

Did they send an escort?

Rhodan barely noticed that Bull had gone silent again. He was thinking about the fact that Crest was the last Arkonide in the solar system. Without him there was zero chance they would make contact with other civilizations in the Milky Way. At least not in this century.

And later? All he had to do was add up one and one, and then give up all hope of there being a later. The people of Earth were about to dig their own grave. Of course, that's what people said in the last century, and the atomic war and total destruction by the

superpowers had not happened. However, the rifts between the nations, East and West, North and South, were by no means gone. What was more, the planet was being bled dry, its wounds becoming more evident every day.

Things were a horrible mess. The sea level was rising faster than anyone could have thought possible. At the same time, the protective ozone layer was disappearing. The fishing war had luckily not exploded the way people had expected, but it had still cost thousands of lives. And there was renewed opposition against the current catch figures, plus fresh fish had become unaffordable in many regions of the world.

In the Amazon Basin, heavily armed militias were guarding several thousand square kilometers of intact jungle. That they were fighting a losing battle was clear from the new slash-and-burn farming that had taken place over the last months. Napalm thrown out of small airplanes was supposed to create fresh grazing land. Perry did not know whether Brazil was using military means to protect the no-flight zone that had been established after that. He had been busy with other things these past few weeks.

He had the chance to change everything. That had been clear to him the very first time he'd set eyes on the spherical ship with the diameter of almost five hundred meters. It had the potential to finally unite humanity. A vision like no other before it. Reaching for the stars together.

His confidence had soon been undermined but not his hope. It was still pinned on the Arkonide, Crest.

He is not a murderer.

And yet besides Thora, Crest was the only one who was fully capable of acting in every respect. Even if he had not given the order for the armed attack on the Moon bases, he had at least known about it and done nothing to prevent it.

Are humans murderers when they kill a fly that's annoying them?

Rhodan was shocked by this comparison, and yet, from the flies' perspective, humans were often responsible for massacres.

There was no denying the dead. Not the crews on the Moon and not the Chinese soldiers in the Gobi. And the tens of thousands of people who had gone on a pilgrimage to the desert to dream the dream of a united humanity. What had they sacrificed? Dead and wounded, for whose fate he also was, to some extent, to blame.

They, citizens of many different lands, who had spontaneously

made their way to the Gobi, had the right to call themselves "Terranians." Without consideration of their origins, their skin color, or religion, they had come together to provide his idea with a foundation.

I owe it to them not to give up! What we all started can't be in vain!

Rhodan listened. The delivery truck had stopped again. Someone was in the cargo area. He could hear voices but couldn't understand what was being said. It was probably the checkpoint before entering the court building. Which meant that things would soon be underway.

Free Crest and make contact with the Arkonides on his home planet. There was no alternative. This was ultimately about all of Earth and more than eight billion humans. This was the time and the place where the decision would be made about whether humanity had a long-term future or not.

The trucker showed some emotion for only a moment. When the hum of the electric motor fell silent, she closed her eyes and leaned her head against the side window. She remained like that for a few seconds and took a few deep breaths before straightening up and looking at Tschubai.

"I thought they had us."

The teleporter nodded towards the outside. "The staff are coming. We should hurry."

Iga nodded silently. The glass elevator had stopped at the parking deck. Four men and women in the discreetly elegant clothing of the domestic staff came towards them pushing tray trolleys.

Iga got out. "Okay," she said and asked for attention. "We were held up, but the DC police got us through. I'll be dispensing the entrées and soups first, along with the drinks. We managed it yesterday, so we'll manage it just as well today. Are there any special requests?"

A woman handed her a tablet. Iga browsed through the notes.

"Is there any information about the lunch break yet? Will it be on time, or will the court be adjourning later?"

"We were told that another witness is to be called to the stand. The presiding judge wants to wait until after the break."

"How long?"

Iga received head shakes as an answer.

Tschubai had also come out of the truck now. They both helped with the transport. They had, of course, studied the blueprints of the court building. Allan Mercant had used his contacts right after Crest's trial had been announced to obtain a data set on a public Internet node. The transfer was impossible to trace. The copy wasn't the best, but it was usable.

The kitchen complex had not been used for years and was pretty outdated. As a cheap provider, Night & Day Catering had a few jobs on its plate but had employed the staff who had been let go to set up a chain of subsidiaries along the East Coast.

Empty corridors branched off from where they stood. Iga saw Tschubai stop and look around several times. These empty rooms were ideal for him as a teleporter, and the fact that he was able to see them directly was great. That way, he could keep his jumps short and save his energy. He might need an empty room as an intermediate destination.

There was a short beep. Iga reached for her pod. The display showed an exploding starburst, the signal from Mercant and Lesly Pounder.

Fifteen minutes was the plan. She had to decide fast whether now or later was the time. It was only another ten minutes until the court's lunch break, and once the courtroom had emptied, some things would become much harder.

Now! That way the risk of being discovered would be as low as possible. She gave her signal for confirmation that they were on. Tschubai saw it and nodded in agreement.

In the preparation room, stuff was being offloaded, distributed, and sorted. Anything that wasn't going to be needed until later found its way into the refrigerated area. There was a subdued hustle and bustle everywhere.

Ceiling monitors were assigned to the respective work areas. The two dining areas for media representatives and guests were accessible, but the rooms where the judges, state attorneys, and jury members withdrew to were off-limits.

One screen showed the online transmission from the Supreme Court. The sound had been turned off, which Iga regretted. It would have helped her to better estimate the rundown of their plan.

The break was pushed back, and the tension in the judges' faces was tangible. The automatic cameras were adjusted to follow people's emotions, which was already standard for most live

reporting, made possible by advanced facial recognition programs. The newest slogan was “Sell emotions.” Joy, suffering, sadness, and desperation were what people who turned on the Net expected.

The automatic cameras searched constantly and recorded as soon as the specified criteria were fulfilled. Every Net team consisted of two people whose tablets acted as mixing desks where all the threads came together. The individual film sequences were selected by fingertip. The editing was, of course, slower and more constant in the courtroom than at other events. Above all, the small flying cameras with the almost noiseless rotors were forbidden.

Crest came into frame. The Arkonide seemed pensive, Iga thought. As if he understood that he was an outsider who didn’t have a chance of escaping Earthly prejudices. He touched his neck often, massaging it with both hands. He was unsure. Was it a confession of his guilt? Or did he just not understand what was happening to him?

At some point, Iga could no longer remember when and where she had heard a remark that suddenly sprang to mind again. It was during one of her many trips across the country, and she had been listening to one of the scientific info stations: *When extraterrestrials land on Earth one day, we will either honor them as gods or we will kill them.*

She no longer had to ask which of these two options was the most accurate now.

Crest only appeared very briefly or the images of him were blurred in the top news stories, if he was even shown at all. Iga found it difficult to guess his age. She was still surprised by the fact that he looked like a human. He was tall and slim, actually very thin. He had wrinkles on his face that revealed he had experienced a lot in life, and he had a strong will. His high forehead showed that he was intelligent, and the look in his red eyes did not seem to miss a thing. His whitish-blonde hair hung down. It was long, almost too long, Iga thought, and this made him look older than he actually might be.

Nevertheless, Crest looked weak, no doubt the result of his illness. And being taken prisoner must also have had an effect on him.

The Arkonide’s expression hardened. The direction faded in to show Manoli. Iga knew the black-haired, unassuming man. The crew of the *Stardust* had been on all the channels pretty often over

the past few weeks. The faces of the four astronauts appeared repeatedly in the front display in her truck, looking like a rogues' gallery.

Eric Manoli, doctor on board the spaceship and materials scientist. The child of Italian immigrants. His parents had gone without everything that made life in the United States worth living in order to pay for his medical studies. Why had this upright doctor become a traitor? Several psychologists had discussed the matter in online talk shows, shedding light on the problem from many angles. But they didn't know. That was all Iga had learned from watching them. The experts had fallen out about whether there had been a traumatic event in Manoli's childhood that might be responsible for his unbelievable behavior, or whether Rhodan and Bull had simply used coercion to make him do what he did. Iga would really like to have heard what Manoli himself had to say about this.

The last packaging units had just been removed and brought from the transporter. Iga grabbed one of the men who was pushing boxes of drinks past on a handcart by the arm.

"Is everything unloaded?"

"The bottles were last, ma'am."

She obtained the electronic confirmation of delivery. Complete, condition okay, just like always. Collecting the empty containers, crockery, cutlery, and garbage from the day before, and loading them was the job of Iga and her co-driver. Nobody asked whether she needed thirty minutes or two hours. Because as soon as she had left the area of the former kitchen complex, she no longer had any direct access to the actual court building. At least not without having to go through a control point again.

She grinned at Tschubai. It was another seven minutes as they both reached the delivery truck. Iga didn't know what Allan was planning; she only knew that the individual parts of their plan must work in perfect coordination. "Like clockwork," he had told her. "Afterwards, you'll know what I mean."

What had she gotten herself into when she'd picked up that hitchhiker with the full canister of gas? But somehow she no longer wanted to miss the way her life had changed since then. Her monotonous routine suddenly had some color and excitement in it. A touch of James Bond.

There was probably already some trouble going on at the city limits this very minute.

Tschubai jumped into the delivery truck. He changed his clothes as fast as he could, the most important items being his wafer-thin gloves and the similarly thin mask that concealed his hair and gave his skin a greenish glow. It was better if the man who kidnapped Crest from the courtroom was not identified as the current catering employee, although Adams had maintained that he had made provisions for such a case.

Perry Rhodan forced himself out of his secure hiding place. Tschubai took his hand. Both of them smiled at Iga, and then they were gone. There was no surveillance equipment in this area. Nobody would notice that Iga was suddenly alone.

Her only worry was the marines in the driveway, although Allan had told her the guards would no longer be there. He had promised to get her out unharmed.

6.

Washington, DC,
The city limits

"The region around Cape Canaveral and launch complex 39 are devoid of any human activity." Lesly Pounder rubbed his face with both hands. He was sweating slightly, which had to do with nervousness more than anything else. "The area is becoming home to an increasing population of alligators and snakes, and who knows what other kinds of creatures have encroached on it."

"Alligators don't shoot using heavy ammunition," Mercant commented. "If there is one thing I learned at Homeland Security, that was it."

Lesly Pounder, flight director of NASA and main person in charge of the *Stardust*'s flight to the Moon under the command of Major Perry Rhodan, examined the small man. Mercant looked younger than he was—a great deal younger, actually. His face had hardly any wrinkles and, if any, only when he smiled. Yet, his skin showed no evidence of the artificial stretching caused by a face-lift.

Pounder nodded reluctantly and thoughtfully studied the mountain of reflecting metal foil that filled most of the storage space. This was something that was not officially known. People had been experimenting for years with a composition of different materials, including special plastic granulate, light metals and a few other ingredients. And they had by no means already reached what they considered to be possible in this respect.

"You'll have to get used to controlling the area on a more regular basis. Brackish water and rampant vegetation don't offer complete protection."

Pounder pushed a hand through his thinning hair. "That will no longer be necessary once we're finished here," he said hesitantly. An annoyed, almost aggressive undertone could be heard in his voice. "I haven't got a clue what the madman was doing so close to the abandoned complex. But at least he's drawn our attention to a

weak spot."

Mercant nodded. "Being prepared for all eventualities, Mr. Pounder, is of the utmost priority in such undertakings. How do you think he knew about it? If I was on the other side of this, you would have a lot of explaining to do."

Lesly Pounder made a face. With his eyes on the shiny metal compound foil, he squeezed himself between the tailboard and the construction. Although the material was a good two meters long, the round edges of the drive unit could be clearly seen below.

A truck was needed to transport it. Adams had organized the vehicle, just as he had organized the giga-truck that Reginald Bull was currently in with the *Phoenix*. Everything had been carried out under pretty tight constraints, but its planning had still been very sound, at least when one considered the circumstances.

Pounder examined the place where the shots had penetrated. The foil had been welded over with new material, but it demonstrated how vulnerable it was. Only millimeters thick, it could withstand normal ammunition. However, the unknown shooter must have used extremely powerful bullets that could penetrate even metal panels.

"Years ago, weapons of that kind disappeared from military depots," Mercant explained. "It's something that people still keep quiet about today."

Whatever. Pounder looked up, because he could feel Mercant staring at him. "If the shot had landed just three meters away, the gas chamber would have exploded in a ball of flame. Do you remember the zeppelin catastrophe at Lakehurst?"

"Yes. The *Hindenburg* went up in flames as it was landing in New Jersey because the hydrogen in its tanks caught fire," Mercant said.

"You're well-informed."

"As a Secret Service man, it was my job to know stuff. But as far as the *Hindenburg* is concerned, it's not that difficult. The Net is full of reports about it. The hundredth anniversary of the catastrophe is in a few months." He took a step backwards. "Is everything in place?"

Pounder had walked all the way to the end of the loading area. The precisely folded cover did not look like it would cause any problems.

"It's ready," he said.

Allan D. Mercant sent the signal to Iga. He received her confirmation less than half a minute later.

The folding top of the truck slid up. For a few seconds, the noise of the lamellas was louder than anything else, but then it was followed by a crackling sound as the foil reacted. Gas flowed out of the tanks into the shell, the top layer swelled up and rose into the air.

It took three minutes to fill completely. Silvery, shimmering reflections could be seen in the truck's interior. They looked like what a scuba diver sees when he is just about to break the surface of an area of water flooded with sunlight.

The foil had an extremely low weight and was highly tear-resistant. Following the memory effect that had been developed while it was being processed, it rose up into the air, initially looking like a giant sausage. The material's memory would only kick in after a certain internal pressure had been surpassed and the welded strips unfolded to take on the form that the cutting pattern intended.

The truck stood in an overgrown park, shielded from direct view by high trees. The heavy vehicle had churned up the soft soil, but the tracks couldn't yet be seen at the fork to the side road that led to the Potomac, only emerging after several hundred meters of dirt road. Industrial ruins had stood there until about twenty years ago. As part of a restoration campaign, they had been left open and some planting work had been done, but now the area was becoming increasingly dilapidated again.

Two rotor cameras flew over the edges of the forest and transmitted pictures of their surroundings. So far they had detected no unwelcome visitors. However, the higher the balloon construction rose, the greater the danger that an eyewitness would panic and set off an alarm.

With a terrible ripping sound, the reinforced gas burner in the outer ring scraped the top edge of the truck. Seconds later, the heavier drive units were lifted up by the higher-up balloon, which was becoming increasingly spherical in shape. A good half of the construction was already protruding above the treetops and must have been visible from far and wide. The silver sheen, which was becoming more intense, was very noticeable even in the midday sun. However, it was possible that many people thought the light

was just some kind of reflection.

Mercant had hung up a tablet set to the news. A badly animated speaker avatar was talking about the end of the world. The distorted face was overlaid repeatedly with scenes from a demonstration. An ocean of banners even managed to push the trial against Crest to the background for a short time.

The last piece of foil released itself from the truck and was caught by the bright silver gleam. The illuminated sphere swelled up to its full size and shape.

“Excellent work, Mr. Pounder.” Allan Mercant seemed pleased. “Your space freaks have outdone themselves, especially taking into consideration the short time frame available.”

The propulsion activated itself with a light humming sound. It was a combination of a propeller system and an ultralight jet engine. Old airship plans had been used along with the highly modern whisperjets, which until now had only been visible on the computers of their designers.

Pounder smiled as he moved the joystick, and the humming sound above him turned into a light buzz. He released the two mooring ropes, thin threads which, thanks to state-of-the-art genetics, had been designed using modified spider glands. High tech from the genetic laboratories of researchers.

A huge, silvery, shimmering sphere was now hanging above the trees. With a diameter of forty-five meters, it was smaller than the auxiliary crafts of the Arkonide spaceship. But who would notice the difference in size?

Red waves ran over the sphere when Pounder ramped up the drive. A second later, a fireball climbed into the radiant blue midday sky before zooming away once it reached a height of almost seven hundred meters.

Surely people would notice it now.

“Is the image transmission okay, Mr. Pounder?”

“Perfect.” The flight director looked over at the monitor of the remote control unit. The recording showed meadows, some areas of wasteland, and then the nearby road came into sight. The first cars had stopped, with people jumping out and staring upwards. The zoomed-in images clearly showed that they were shading their eyes with their hands.

The tablet let out a shrill warning tone. And even if the speaker avatar looked like it had turned to stone, the artificial voice

suddenly sounded very high-pitched, as if it were about to slip into the ultrasonic range. It was a very bad acoustic modification.

“The invasion has begun! Alien spaceships have entered our atmosphere. We are receiving an increasing number of reports that the attackers have been seen heading for Washington. We only hope that our interceptors...” The avatar became blurred as the sound exploded in a crescendo.

“I don’t think our improvised spaceship can even be seen on the radar screens of the nearest airport,” Pounder commented when he saw the confused message. “The material has pretty good stealth properties.”

He had never quite recovered from the fact that NASA had been cleared out of its complexes in Florida. The melting of the ice caps at the two poles had made the sea level rise continuously. Strong flooding was forecast for the coming decades. And these forecasts, even though they had already sounded bad, had even been exceeded in every respect.

Deserted buildings, the land empty of humans. Pounder had grabbed at the opportunity being offered to him. In the beginning, it was only him and a few kindred spirits the flight director could trust, but now there were dozens of specialists with him, and they had brought hustle and bustle back into Cape Canaveral. In three to four years at the latest, Pounder wanted to have established the foundations for developing space travel “in a different way” to NASA. His people followed the craziest concepts. The idea for the new material came from one of them. Light, robust, cheap to make. The first tests in the form of stratospheric balloons had been successful. The material was easy to work with and easy to form.

The concept for the first airship had already been developed in Kiel, and the results from that were to flow into the designs for a small, reusable, airplane-like spaceship. That had been the current state of things when Mercant had become involved.

The spherical ship was nothing more than an advanced balloon. And yet it was effective as long as the vehicle spread fear.

“Divert the image streaming onto the tablet,” Mercant requested.

The blood-red sphere was now moving rapidly over a densely populated area. There were people on the streets everywhere, staring at the sky. Pounder would have given considerably more than a penny for their thoughts at that moment.

“I know what you’re waiting for,” Mercant suddenly said.

The flight director checked the programmed route. What people believed to be a spaceship was by no means approaching the Capitol in a straight line, but its turn in that direction would come in about thirty seconds.

“I never doubted for one minute, Mercant, that you only make promises you can keep. You said that neither police helicopters nor private airlines would get in the way of our little spaceship. Where are the interceptors?”

“At the moment, they’re still in their hangars.”

“You can’t have bribed the military.”

The former Secret Service man raised an eyebrow. “As is proper, I merely reminded someone who owed me a favor. The chain of command has been interrupted, at least until we’re on the home stretch.”

He looked at the images on the tablet. An industrial area came into view at the edge of the residential area. The complex had been out of operation for two years and was to be demolished to make way for a casino. All of this was information that Mercant had obtained during the planning phase.

“It’s time for our ship to show what it can do!”

Pounder ignited the gas burner that simulated the engines in the ring-shaped bulge around the middle of the sphere. Anyone close enough to the supposed side boat might have realized it was a trick, but from a distance of several hundred meters, it all looked very real. And anyway, the wildest rumors about the properties of the Arkonide auxiliary craft were already making the rounds. People relied on meager and not particularly high-quality photos from the Evernet as their main source of information.

Bright bursts of flame shot out of the improvised jets on the ring. Some encompassed the balloon’s corpus due to its forward movement, but that just made the sight even more spectacular. The mounted cameras only gave an approximate impression anyway.

Several heavy explosions took place between the factory buildings, one after the other. Bubbling clouds of glowing embers rose up above the roofs, followed by mushroom-shaped clouds of smoke that developed into elongated black clouds in the sky.

The two rotor cameras above the edges of the forest recorded the bursts of the explosions and the heavy smoke across a distance of several dozen kilometers.

“That was just the beginning,” Mercant said in a satisfied tone. “My pyrotechnicians work with precision. Nevertheless, what matters most of all is the very last explosion.”

In the Meantime

One of numerous news channels that broadcasts half-truths

"...we have just received information that the Arkonides have appeared above North America. It is unclear whether spaceships have also been sighted above other continents in the last few minutes. We still do not have any confirmation from our radar stations. But that is the official version.

"Unofficially, there has been a total breakdown in our telephone system, because hundreds of callers tried to reach us simultaneously during the first few minutes of the sightings. All reports speak of a blood-red sphere that is approaching Washington from the air, flying at low altitude. We must expect hostile action. I repeat: we must prepare for an attack by the Arkonides. Anyone who believes this is just a friendly visit is a fool. The aliens are coming to free their leader.

"That is why you should follow the urgent advice given by the independent voice of North America. No matter where you find yourself at the present time, avoid public places and buildings, and more than anything else, avoid large gatherings of people. Proceed to the lower levels of underground parking lots and subway stations, and wait for the all-clear. If you are driving on the highway, take the next exit and seek protection beneath some trees, or in vacant buildings..."

An agonizing wheeze could be heard in the background, and somebody said breathlessly, "Oh my God! Say it's not true!" which was almost certainly not supposed to be broadcast across half of North America.

Then the speaker's voice returned. He sounded hoarse, a fact he was unable to disguise. "I must correct myself. Whatever you do, do *not* seek out vacant factory buildings. I repeat, do *not* seek protection in vacant factory buildings. We have just received information that Smith & Smithson Productions has been razed to the ground by the aliens. The clouds of embers and ash can be seen

for miles around."

Again there was a brief pause.

"Five miles into town, the halls of the former Tablets Inc. are ablaze. The chip manufacturer was set to decide in the coming days whether to resume production next month, but nothing will come of that now. The attackers from outer space are in the process of paralyzing our industry. Where on earth are the flight interceptors? For God's sake, people, you are otherwise present at hot spots all over the globe, but when it comes to an attack on your home country... God save our nation!"

7.

Supreme Court, Washington, DC,
High noon

"I vehemently deny all charges. Perry Rhodan, Reginald Bull, Clark Flipper, and myself as the ship's physician on the *Stardust* have never acted in any way that went against America's interests."

"Then please explain to me what the Supreme Court should think about the shuttle landing site after its return from the Moon," State Attorney Nesmith asked immediately. He did not have his facial expression under control, and the corners of his mouth showed an air of contempt. "I was unaware that the People's Republic of China had been accepted by some strange power as the fifty-first state of the USA. I also presume that this is highly unlikely to be confirmed by any other person present here today."

A murmur passed through the crowd of onlookers in the courtroom. The occasional derisive laugh could be heard.

The defending attorney William Tifflor stood up and, with a casual gesture, signaled for calm to return to the courtroom. There was almost immediate silence. Tifflor smiled.

"Justices, by uttering such comments—I don't know how else to describe what he just said without meandering from the realm of civility—the state attorney is not doing himself or his client any favors. He is, in fact, placing himself outside of jurisprudence. Jack Nesmith is about to render the dignity of due process a matter of ridicule."

You could have heard a pin drop.

The presiding judge shook his head, but the movement was barely visible. His stare was fixated on the star defender. "I expect a more precise definition from you, Mr. Tifflor."

"That is..." the state attorney interrupted but remained quiet in response to a hand gesture from the judge.

"Mr. Tifflor, I'm listening!"

"The relationship between China and the USA should be

something that even a ten-year-old is sufficiently aware of. I therefore assume that the state prosecutor is also aware of it. In which case, I must unfortunately assume that the comment was made with the intention of implying that the witness—later to become the accused in a second trial—has a certain disregard for the rule of law. If that was not the intention of the state prosecutor…" The pause taken by Tifflor was too short to be provoking, but it was noticeable, "Then I must ask the witness to provide the necessary background for his statements. Why, Dr. Manoli, are you of the opinion that you did not act in violation of the interest of our state?"

The presiding judge gave a brief nod. "The objection is sustained. Dr. Manoli, please answer the question."

The ship's doctor licked his lips. You could tell he was searching for the right words. He was the quiet type who sought to express himself in a balanced manner, something that had already become clear while he was being questioned. Nobody in the courtroom expected an outburst of emotion from him.

"We had the Arkonide Crest on board. The relationship between the three power blocks is something I can in all conscience only describe as mutual spying motivated by jealousy of one another. It is all about achieving economic hegemony, about resources, and also about energy. What we found on the Moon—the know-how and advanced technology of the Arkonides—is enough to allow for effortless control over all three factors."

"Which would have made it all the more your duty to land exactly where the *Stardust* took off," the state prosecutor interjected.

"That is something that Perry Rhodan, the commander of our mission, deliberately avoided."

"You are speaking of the former commander and traitor, Perry Rhodan. The impression should not be given here that his desertion was an act of chivalry."

"You should be grateful to Rhodan for this 'desertion,' Mr. State Prosecutor."

Everyone in the courtroom was holding their breath, but Nesmith did not react this time. He had an amused smile on his lips.

"Pull yourself together, Dr. Manoli!" the presiding judge demanded of the witness.

"I apologize. Maybe I should answer with a question. If one of

the planet's three superpowers all of a sudden had possession of the means to solve all of our problems, what would the others do? Ask politely for charity?"

The atmosphere remained tense. An occasional gasp for air could be heard.

"Let us have your answer, Dr. Manoli!"

"Open conflict would have been the unavoidable result. Probably within a few days or weeks, before our country was strong enough to replicate and use the Arkonide technology. I believe that is referred to in military terms as a preemptive strike."

"You are inventing your own truth of the matter," the state prosecutor responded. "That is your view of things. None of our strategists or psychologists who were questioned arrived at that conclusion." Nesmith turned to the judge's bench. "I request that the corresponding expert opinions be added as prosecutory evidence."

"We did what was best for humanity!" Eric Manoli insisted. "We went the only possible way that promises a better future."

"The only possible way?" the state prosecutor asked. "I very much doubt that. What about the nuclear explosion in the Gobi? That certainly didn't look like an attempt at peaceful cooperation."

Again Nesmith turned to the presiding judge. "I would also like to request that another witness be examined: Clark G. Flipper, astronomer and payload specialist on board the *Stardust*. He will confirm that the astronauts' opinions are by no means as unanimous as the witness Manoli would like to make it appear."

There was a second of absolute silence in the courtroom. And then all hell broke loose.

"What's that all about?" Clifford Monterny asked as Flipper entered the courtroom and was brought to the witness bench. He looked at Tatiana. "Clark Flipper is dead! Who's behind this? Tell me, what's Nesmith thinking?"

Clark G. Flipper had fled from the Gobi shortly after the *Stardust* had landed, taking the Arkonide battledress with him, in order to cover up Manoli and Crest's escape. But he had also gone in search of his girlfriend, Beth, who had disappeared in the Himalayas. His search was in vain, and people had lost track of him in the world's highest mountain range. Nobody had heard anything from him since.

The telepath looked down into the courtroom. She seemed to be distracted, massaging her temples with both hands.

"If Nesmith is too complicated for you, try Flipper!" Monterny snapped. "He's the unsteadiest of them all."

"Why don't you ask Drummond?" Deegan hissed in the background. "He wants everything, and he certainly won't share."

Monterny stared at the telekinetic in disbelief. Not because of his remark about the president, which he fully agreed with. He was staring at a cigarette that was moving as if held by a ghostly hand in front of Deegan as well as a match that lit itself by scraping the parquet flooring. The cigarette moved in a targeted manner towards Deegan and lodged between his lips, then the match lit the cigarette and was snuffed out by a hefty shaking movement before disappearing below the nearest chair.

The telekinetic puffed away, causing a thick cloud of smoke to appear in the room. That was the moment in which Clifford Monterny exploded in anger, tearing the cigarette out of Deegan's mouth and crushing it with his hand. When Deegan jumped up, Monterny held him down.

"Quiet!" he said, with a threatening calmness. "You'll reveal that we're up here by activating the sprinkler system. Are you crazy?"

Deegan lifted his shoulders and let them drop slowly again. Monterny already had his pod in his hand and was speed-dialing a contact, who was identifiable only under the number zero.

"What's happening there?" he burst out when President Drummond picked up on the other end. "Why don't I know about Flipper? Who pulled him out of a hat?"

"Until ten minutes ago, I knew nothing about him either. Flipper turned himself in and offered to speak out against his former comrades."

"There's more to this than meets the eye."

"Flipper blames Rhodan and the others for the death of his girlfriend. She disappeared in the Himalayas while the crew was on the Moon. If the *Stardust* had returned earlier or if Rhodan had let him out of the energy dome one day earlier, Flipper could have saved her."

"That's nonsense."

"Of course it is," Drummond said calmly. "But that's what Flipper believes. And that benefits us. What could be more

convincing for the court and for the masses on the streets than the statement of a former comrade?"

"Maybe. But why, of all things, is he wearing an Arkonide battledress? That's more than an affront."

Drummond laughed quietly and in a tone that conjured up a deep wrinkle of disapproval on Monterny's forehead.

"He insisted," the president said. "He wants to humiliate the others, and why should we not grant him this small favor? He said he'll remove the battledress and hand it over to us—that is, the United States—"

"Yeah, yeah," Monterny interrupted him. "I still don't like it!"

"It doesn't matter. There's nothing you can do to change it, Clifford. Forget about it." The president hung up.

Monterny stared silently into space for a few seconds before turning back to the telepath. "What's Flipper thinking? Come on, I'm waiting!"

"I'm having problems..." Tatiana pressed her lips together and buried her face in her hands.

Forcing the young woman to continue in that state would achieve nothing...would, in fact, be the stupidest thing he could do. Monterny knew that. Perhaps there were too many intense thoughts in the area, making it difficult for her to concentrate on one or two individuals. She had spent too much time looking for Rhodan and Bull, and the effort of that had exhausted her.

It was strange that Flipper had suddenly appeared out of nowhere after they had tracked down the two ringleaders. He didn't like it. It was an obvious coincidence that only those close to Rhodan would notice.

Was Flipper something like the vanguard? A sacrificial pawn who would allow himself to be caught in a trap if there was a trap? That was the kind of thing Rhodan would do, he was sure. But what were the three of them planning?

He glanced at Tatiana. She was concentrating as hard as she could. A light shudder seemed to pass through her body. Was it weakness making itself apparent? Was it too much for her?

Monterny stepped as far forward as he deemed safe. He saw Flipper in the witness stand stepping from one leg to the other, as if he was brewing up something. The people from the media obviously didn't know how to react, and they looked around restlessly.

One of them looked upwards, and his face suddenly took on a look of surprise. One of the extremely expensive three-dimensional Net cameras was swinging abruptly back and forth.

"Enough!" a loud voice shouted through the courtroom.

Monterny stared in disbelief at the man who was standing above the entrance area between two galleries with both arms spread out. He did not have to worry about drawing attention, as all eyes were on him. His gesture seemed more like an attempt to include the entire world.

"This so-called trial is a farce! Crest da Zoltral is not the man we should be afraid of! Crest can save humanity. If we don't kill him!"

Rhodan! The astronaut was standing there as if it was the most natural thing in the world. As if nothing could prevent him from talking to the rolling cameras.

"The charges against Eric Manoli and Dr. Haggard are completely unfounded. Both of them are medical doctors, and they only did their duty by saving a life."

Rhodan had put on a battledress, and it seemed to make him unassailable. None of the guards in the courtroom were carrying a lethal weapon anyway. All they could do was give someone an electric shock from about three or four meters away. It was enough to prevent one of the accused from getting away. Painful, but not sufficient to stop the madman from talking.

The first guards were already moving, rushing down the side aisles and right across the courtroom to the entrance.

"I demand that you end this spectacle immediately and release Crest da Zoltral, Eric Manoli, and Dr. Haggard!"

Crest! These idiots had left the accused alone to try to catch Rhodan. That should have been left to the soldiers. Monterny didn't care who got the astronaut. He asked himself how the man could have gotten into the courtroom in the first place. There were soldiers waiting outside to get a hold of him before he could do any damage.

And Bull?

"Flipper is a traitor!" Tatiana cried out. "He's here to free his comrade, Manoli!"

Monterny was suddenly hot all over. He had to act if he didn't want to lose the Arkonide.

"Roster!" he yelled and stormed to the balustrade of the box

they were in. “We have to get Crest!”

Out of nowhere, Rhodan materialized with Tschubai above the courtroom entrance. He strengthened his grip on Tschubai’s hand but removed it again and stepped back without saying a word. The columns, which seemed to be a load-bearing element here as well, shielded the teleporter from inquisitive looks and allowed him to concentrate on his next change of location.

Nobody was looking in his direction. Rhodan’s eyes scanned the courtroom, taking in everything at once, although he was still not consciously aware of half of what was actually going on.

Three, four minutes at most were left for him to say what he thought was important but what the world obviously did not want to hear... *Did not want to believe*, he corrected himself. Most people wouldn’t even consider taking a mental step outside of their usual way of thinking.

Up in the gallery where the media representatives were, someone turned their head in his direction. Rhodan involuntarily made eye contact and saw the man blink in confusion before he opened his eyes wide and started playing with a wide wristwatch on his arm. It was obviously a remote control, as one of the heavy cameras swung around.

Smiling, Rhodan spread out his arms. “Enough!” he called, and at that moment it was as if a jolt went through the entire courtroom. “This so-called trial is a farce! Crest da Zoltral is not the man we should be afraid of! Crest can save humanity. If we don’t kill him!”

He had thought about what he wanted to say. Despite that, he spoke freely as he thought...and while he was talking, he noticed that Crest was sitting in the dock without handcuffs, but guarded by several people in uniform. The guards, however, were paying hardly any attention to the Arkonide, staring at the astronaut instead.

“The charges against Eric Manoli and Dr. Haggard are completely unfounded. Both of them are medical doctors, and they only did their duty by saving a life.”

Flipper was there. Rhodan had only noticed him at that very second. They looked at one another without understanding what it was that had brought them together. Crest? Had Flipper voluntarily given himself up in order to free the Arkonide?

“I demand that you end this spectacle immediately and release Crest da Zoltral, Eric Manoli, and Dr. Haggard!”

Rhodan became aware of two shadows high up. The two figures, who had exited from a box, were clearly wearing Arkonide battledresses. But whoever they were, in that moment, a thunderous explosion shook the building. The air seemed to vibrate, and the floor swayed. There was suddenly dust everywhere and a large tear about as thick as a human arm in the wall. It became wider and split the brickwork as if struck by a huge ax.

A second, weaker explosion followed. The new quake caused plaster to fall from the ceiling and rain down on the courtroom below. Large chunks of masonry broke off the wall and fell onto the seats, which were already empty as everyone was rushing towards the exit. There was a loud roaring sound as a long section of wall collapsed.

It was a perfect explosion that left everyone enough time to escape the dangerous part of the room. Rhodan secretly congratulated the former Homeland Security man, Mercant, and his people who had prepared this. They had probably only planted plastic explosives, but in an exposed building like the Supreme Court, it was something akin to a kamikaze mission. Above all, there must not be any fatalities or even injuries. A precise surgical strike had been required, and very few specialists had mastered that art.

Bright red light shone into the courtroom from outside. Barely more than half a minute had passed since the first explosion. A voice boomed down at them from a loudspeaker.

8.

Supreme Court,
Washington, DC

The explosion shook the courtroom as Clifford Monterny swung himself over the balustrade. Just an arm's reach away, he saw the sidewall tear apart in front of him, and part of it moved with a grinding sound. Dust and stone chips were forced inwards as if blown by a huge fan, forcing people to flee. Piercing screams mixed with the crashing sound of collapsing walls. The cries of the court usher sounded a little helpless.

A second explosion made a larger chunk of wall break off. It completely smashed a row of seats, where only a few seconds ago media representatives had been sitting. Monterny saw the autocamera directed at Rhodan being crushed.

Where was Rhodan? The astronaut was still standing between the galleries. How on Earth had the man managed to enter the courtroom unnoticed, protected only by his battledress?

The guards would never reach him fast enough. They were stuck in the crowd. Monterny had nothing but contempt for the people who were wedged in hopelessly between rows of seats and in front of the exit.

Bloody red, flickering firelight poured into the courtroom. For a moment it even seemed as if a cloud of dust was going up in flame.

Crest looked to be unmoved by everything going on around him. He was sitting at his place as if he had long since given up on life. Maybe that's the way it was. He was old and tired, and the illness had perhaps affected him more than he wanted to admit.

"Tatiana!" Monterny roared, catapulting his thoughts in her direction. It was impossible for him to know whether he had reached the telepath or not. But it was vital that she now isolate Crest and try to get deeper into his subconscious. Was the Arkonide waiting for someone to free him from his unfortunate situation?

Flipper was also waiting stubbornly at his place. The only

action he took was to grab at the neck of his battledress and pull the transparent foil helmet forward.

"Clifford!"

Monterny heard Deegan's yell but did not react to it. Shortly before the explosion, Manoli had been escorted by an officer out of the courtroom. But the former ship's doctor was of secondary importance...

A painful blow to the side tore Monterny from his thoughts. Deegan had given him a hefty telekinetic punch.

"Look at that!" The mutant pointed at the semi-collapsed sidewall.

Monterny suppressed his rising anger as well as a strong rebuke. There was a red glow over everything.

That was why Crest had remained so calm—inhumanly calm, in fact. The glow came from an energy shield. In its structure, the shield was very similar to the dome that had fended off the attacks by the Chinese army for some time. It was wrapped around a huge sphere, clinging close to its surface. Its diameter must have been about fifty meters.

Monterny could not see its full size, but he still recognized the thick, ringlike belt around its middle. Was it an auxiliary craft from the *Aetron*, which had been destroyed on the Moon? A shuttle...and yet it was still overwhelming and powerful.

Monterny only now began to grasp just how huge the mother ship must have been. Anyone with access to such a colossal machine could rule the world if he wanted to.

The red sphere did not have any landing legs. It lay on the well-tended, always neatly trimmed lawn in front of the building. No, it wasn't on the ground; it was floating above it at a height of about two meters.

When the voice roared out of the loudspeakers, Monterny realized that only a few minutes could have passed since the first explosion.

"People of the Earth, this small and meaningless planet!" The voice must have been heard for miles around. "You are uneducated, arrogant, and have forgotten yourselves. A wild civilization like yours does not understand how to judge over an Arkonide. Release Crest, or you will pay a high price for your insolence."

The thunder of further explosions echoed. Sirens wailed. Monterny asked himself whether that was coincidence or was

supposed to make the threat seem more ominous.

Suddenly the air was filled with the hard staccato of machine-gun fire. There was a short sharp hiss in between, followed right away by a heavy detonation. The Marines were attacking the spaceship on the orders of the president. It was a pathetic performance compared to what the Chinese had thrown into battle.

A grenade launcher fired again, and then came the rattle of machine guns. It looked to Monterny like a handful of ants trying to keep a human from their nest. And the attempt would fail. The Arkonides would raze Washington to the ground and set an unmistakable example.

Stanley, you idiot! How often had he thought that. Now it was final and irrevocable.

"Roster! Take care of Flipper! I'll get Crest! We have to get out of here before—"

A glaring, almost soundless explosion silenced Monterny. A huge ball of fire rolled across the lawn but consumed itself after only a few dozen meters and didn't even reach the broken building. Most of the blaze rushed towards the sky, hissing before it went out without causing any real amount of smoke.

All that could be heard now was the barking of a single automatic weapon, as if the shooter had not grasped the fact that it was all over. The shooting finally ceased. There was deathly silence everywhere, only interrupted by the increasingly loud crackling and creaking sounds coming from the walls.

The Arkonide auxiliary craft no longer existed.

"Leave Crest alone! He has done nothing."

Flipper's loud protests surprised Deegan. Especially as the astronaut was not looking at him, but staring aghast towards the outside, where the landed sphere had gone up in a ball of flame.

Deegan somehow had the feeling that that couldn't have been everything. He was less than two meters away from Flipper. The handsome astronaut had not closed his helmet but pulled it far enough forward so that the foil had hardened to its transparent form.

"Who are you two?" Flipper asked. "You certainly didn't get your battledresses from the Arkonides."

"And what if we did?" Deegan asked gruffly. "What then?"

Flipper looked at him thoughtfully. "Those are the suits from

Eric and Crest, am I right?"

"What if they are? What belongs to only one person their entire life?"

"So you and the other guy are to blame for the fact that my friends are in front of the court."

"Your friends? Aren't you here to testify against them?" Deegan drew his thumb demonstratively across his throat. He was just waiting for Flipper to attack him, but the astronaut had no intention of doing him the favor. Clark Flipper was a slick guy, the kind who made Roster feel sick every time he looked at him.

Flipper's energy shield built up. Shimmering, the protective aura covered the astronaut, but it did not stabilize. Like fog, the field flowed apart, took on a clearer outline again, and was gone within seconds.

Deegan gave a hoarse laugh. "Are the energy reserves used up? You've been on the move with the suit for some time. That makes you vulnerable."

Flipper shook his head as he stretched his hand out expectantly. "Give me back the suit!" he demanded.

Deegan found their conversation a little strange. They eyed one another, but all they were doing was turning in a circle. "A stalemate" was what they called it in chess, when neither player could gain the upper hand. Flipper obviously believed they were equal opponents. Perhaps he was even right about that. It would be interesting to test that theory. When both of them had their helmets closed, perhaps it would be impossible for one to overcome the other one.

Deegan folded his arms. He chewed on his lower lip, biding his time. "If you want something from me, then come and get it!"

Flipper rushed forward. He grabbed at Roster with both hands and tried to knock him over. There was nothing wrong with his approach, but then Flipper was unable to get out of his semi-twisted position again. It was amusing to see the look of surprise on his face. To see the eyes of the athletic-looking man open wider and wider because he couldn't even manage to pull back his hand. Flipper gasped slightly.

"Let go of my wrist!" Roster demanded. "Can't you do it? Have you lost your courage?" He grabbed the astronaut's hand with his left and bent the astronaut's fingers open.

"And you can go wherever you want. I won't stop you. What's

wrong? Too weak?"

"I can't move," Flipper groaned.

Deegan raised an eyebrow. "Oh," he said derisively. "Is it better like that?"

The astronaut tumbled and almost fell. He straightened up and felt his arm.

"How did you do that?"

"Magic." Deegan said. "Now give me your battledress. And make it fast, please."

Roster laughed at the angry look in Flipper's eyes as he stared back at him. He threw a few telekinetic punches at the astronaut's face. The skin on Flipper's cheeks burst open and a thin trickle of blood ran over his chin. He wiped his face with the back of his hand and looked at the smeared blood in shock.

"Do you understand now?" Deegan snarled.

Flipper nodded weakly. Still reluctant, he opened his suit. With some effort, he tried to pull the heavy battledress from his shoulders.

"Roster!" Monterny's half-stifled call made Deegan turn around abruptly. He was in the grip of a strong opponent who had twisted his arm up his back and was holding the other arm tight beneath his chin.

Roster used his telekinetic powers to help Monterny out of the grasp of the other man. He didn't look more closely until he saw the face of the attacker hanging in tatters. Then a heavy blow hit him that made his helmet open halfway up. Flipper jumped at him, grabbed the collar, and closed his hands around Roster's neck. Deegan gurgled in horror. Helpless, he tried to force his opponent's arms apart.

"I'm not going to let you stop Rhodan!" Flipper said. "I've been thinking, and Perry is right."

The grip was cutting off Deegan's air, and the telekinetic could hardly breathe. He could see black spots dancing before his eyes, and his head was throbbing terribly as he felt himself slipping out of consciousness.

He used the last of his strength to concentrate. He put all his hate into it and whacked it into Flipper's face. Flipper's grip loosened a little, but he did not let go until Deegan let out another blow.

Flipper tumbled backwards. Blood spurted out of his nose, but

he didn't even seem to realize it. He came back up again, unsteady on his feet, wanting to attack again.

Hit by an invisible fist, Flipper stopped mid-movement. Deegan stared at him. His eyes couldn't focus properly. He saw his opponent as a blur, like many images overlapping one another. He focused on one single point, just a centimeter above the top of Flipper's nose. Everything else was in a haze...

He felt fragments of bone yielding, and he penetrated even deeper. Then he was suddenly standing up, panting heavily and bent over forward, the way he did after he had exerted a great amount of effort. His hands were leaning on his upper thigh, he was shaking and bathed in sweat.

Flipper lay twisted on the ground. A quick glance was enough to tell him that the astronaut was dying. His forehead was completely caved in, and blood was running from his nose.

Still having difficulty breathing, Deegan straightened himself up and vomited.

Iga Tulodziecki had heard the muffled rumble that sounded as if half of Washington were standing on an erupting volcano. The quakes could be clearly felt in the rear parking deck. She even feared for a moment that the classic column facade of the western entrance would collapse in on itself like a house of cards.

Nothing like that seemed to have happened.

Iga missed the ticker-tape news that was integrated into the front windshield. When she was driving for days alone on the highways behind the wheel of the giga-truck, it had been her beloved and constant companion.

Her pod was in its holder on the dashboard. She pressed her finger on the small display. "Dialing in the order of one then two," it said in John Wayne's voice. Who knew him anymore? Iga loved his films, which is why she had done everything to get an app with his voice. Not exactly cheap to get a hold of, but it was worth it.

One was Rhodan, two was Ras Tschubai. Neither of them answered.

Iga tapped the brakes and rolled over the ramp at walking speed. The driveway was deserted, as Adams had predicted. The Marines seemed to have disappeared into thin air.

A bright red light that even outshone the midday sun hung in the air. Allan had hinted at the appearance of something unusual

but had not elaborated further.

Sirens wailed in the distance. Iga let the side windows down, and the sound became clearer. She could also hear shots. Machine guns were shooting off their staccato rounds. She no longer had to ask where the soldiers were. Obviously, fighting was going on on the other side of the building.

Keep driving slowly. Stay nearby so that Ras could find a place that was easy for him to go to. As soon as Rhodan and Crest were on board... No, not even then could she step on the gas. She had to remain inconspicuous.

She could feel a dull shaking and a hissing sound like gas escaping. Flames shot up into the sky. Iga saw their fiery reflection, trying to crane her neck at an awkward angle to see more.

Far up high there was a sparkling dot, becoming bigger, reflecting the sunlight. A second later, the sparkling ceased. What remained was a bright metallic shimmer.

Iga stopped the delivery truck, got out, and was able to see the sky better. She shaded her eyes from the blinding sun with the flat of her hand. The sparkling dot had become a small disc. It continued to grow as if it was approaching at high speed.

It wasn't a disc, even if it looked like one. Iga already recognized the spherical shape. Whatever it was flying towards the obelisk and coming in to land, it looked like it had come from far away. From very far away. Something from another world.

Iga grimaced. A little bit of irony never hurt, but this didn't seem like the right time or place for it. She sank back into the driver's seat with a sigh, closed her eyes, and stretched her legs. Maybe when she opened her eyes again, it would all turn out to be a bad nightmare.

Her pod rang. It was Rhodan.

"Tschubai has been held up. Stay nearby!" he said hastily. And then he was gone again.

Iga asked herself what could hold up a teleporter, and especially how. It was only conceivable if someone was holding a gun to his head.

9.

Thora

Thora da Zoltral was able to move freely in Zarakh'khazil. Nevertheless, she felt more like a prisoner than a guest in her accommodations. The sense of unrest she had felt since her first encounter with Rico was refusing to go away. What was more, she was tormented by concern for Tamika, her co-pilot, who was fighting for her life in the intensive care unit at the Venus refuge.

But the worst thing of all for her was the thought that Crest had been kidnapped and was being held by unscrupulous human animals who had put him on trial. To be an Arkonide being held prisoner by underdeveloped barbarians was something that her mentor certainly did not deserve. And apart from anything else, he had hoped for much better things in the last years of his life. So much better.

It was demeaning. A crime. These barbarians on their little world dared to do things they had no right to.

Thora looked angrily around the sparsely furnished living room. A bed, an armchair, a table and a sanitary cabin that had presumably not been used for years and stank of disinfectant was all there was.

The few items she had brought with her in the damaged suit lay on the table: a multifunctional pen with a reading lamp, a cutlery set, the thin disc of a logbook...

An incomplete hologram, which had lost its shiny surface years ago, simulated a window to the outside. Thora paid it little attention. It reminded her of natural decay. Of death and decay. Even thinking about it made her feel nauseous, a sense of disgust rising within.

Thora began to wander around restlessly. Ten steps forward, ten steps back, like a caged kiwirrl. It was unbearable having time as her only companion.

The rooms in the residential towers were small. Zarakh'khazil

had been built for an unknown number of refugees. Each of these safe havens had space for thousands.

After a while, Thora had had enough of time and of refugees and this insignificant solar system, where the only reason for her presence was an unfavorable mood of fate. She let herself down into the armchair and, in her mind, sent out a cry for help to the celestial gods.

“Do you have any wishes, Thora da Zoltral?” a tub-shaped servo robot by the door asked her.

“No!” she replied brusquely.

She didn’t like these robots. Models of the same construction type had attacked her and Tamika, leaving the latter seriously injured. The fact that the station was a place of refuge for Arkonide colonists did not make the situation any more comprehensible. She was furious with those who had established the behavioral requirements for all robots at the station a very long time ago. At the same time, she was aware that she would have acted no differently herself. If Arkonides sought refuge, it meant that something was threatening them, and threats had to be dealt with immediately and without compromise.

“Actually, there is!” she snapped at the robot. “Tell me how Tamika is doing!”

“Her condition is stable but unchanged.”

Thora expected that. Nevertheless, she had not received one word of apology, not from the servo robot, and not from the station director. An unbearable amount of time had passed before the machines had brought the director out of his deep sleep, which was why the reconnaissance craft had been shot down by Space Defense.

She not only wanted to hear a formal apology from Rico, but also an admission of guilt. Rico was tall and slim, and his white hair flowed over his shoulders like a shimmering aura. But his manners... After thousands of years spent in loneliness and deep sleep, he’d had to make some very difficult sacrifices.

“Connect me with Rico!” she ordered the servo robot.

She had no intention of wasting a minute more of her time in the station. The thought of Crest worried her. And she didn’t know what had happened to Quiniu, the pilot of the second reconnaissance craft, or where she was now.

“Rico is already on his way here,” the robot answered.

Was she mistaken, or could she detect a touch of hostility in its

tone? It didn't matter.

Rico approached with hasty, heavy footsteps. He remained standing in the open doorway. "The ship is ready for launch!"

Thora stared at him in surprise. During their first conversation, he had shown no reaction to her desire to reach the third planet as fast as possible. Earth was not a name, but at best a state of rotten matter.

"Before we leave Zarakh'khazil, I want to say goodbye to Tamika," she said. The director of the Venus station acknowledged her request but made no comment.

A few minutes later, Thora was standing in front of the intensive care unit. Tamika was lying in a tank filled with a nutrient solution. Dozens of tiny tubes were connected to her blood circulation via cannulae. The machine made sure that her blood circulated through her body and enriched it with oxygen.

Thora called up the current biodata onto the monitor. Tamika's vitals had worsened since the early morning.

"May the eternal light of Arkon protect and strengthen you, Tamika!" Was Thora mistaken or had the seriously wounded patient's eyelids fluttered? Tamika was in a coma. Had she, despite that, heard and even understood the traditional blessing?

Feeling a little perturbed, Thora turned and left.

"You no doubt want to know how many ships the station has at its disposal," Rico said to her. "One single ship. As I already mentioned, the refuge was set up for emergencies but never used."

Thora didn't understand that. Zarakh'khazil was supposed to take in refugees, although there was no Arkonide colony in this sector.

"What are you hiding from me, Rico?"

He ignored her question. "Please put on the protective suit." He said nothing more than that.

She used the elevator shaft. Thora was surprised when Rico made no move to leave the field, which was polarized upwards, as they slid past the exit to the ramp. His destination was the bulkhead she had believed to be the end of the shaft when she'd first arrived. It turned out to be the entrance to a hollow sphere.

Thora looked up towards the ship in the light reflected by blue illuminated rings that ran at regular intervals around the interior of the hollow sphere. A sixty-meter sphere had built itself up above her. Several of the landing supports were slightly displaced,

possibly due to errors in the hydraulics. The landing plate did not have full contact with the ground.

Thora could just make out the weathered and partially corroded and blurred lettering on the outer shell.

Tosoma IX.

So, it was the auxiliary craft of a larger *Tosoma* ship.

The fuselage had grooves and melted streaks on it. The irregular contours of a hole caused by some kind of ammunition could be seen at the bottom. The ship's automatic repair routines had sealed it.

Thora gave Rico an indignant look. "A place of refuge for countless thousands of Arkonides...an auxiliary craft that has obviously been involved in heavy fighting...a battleship about which no data concerning its place in the refuge exists... Am I right? This is an unacceptable state of affairs."

Rico remained standing where he was. It was the only way he could react to her verbal attack.

By all the spirits of Arkon, she thought bitterly. *He is as cold as ice!*

Rico gestured towards an open porthole.

"I have not been informed about the state of the weapons systems," he explained to her as she was being transported up by the anti-grav. "But at least the drive works perfectly."

To be in charge of a functioning spaceship again was progress, at least, Thora thought. Even if it was only a decrepit auxiliary craft that did not have enough range to get her back home.

"So you and Crest were on a research mission," Rico said as they entered the lock chamber. "I assume the coordinates of your destination were lost when the *Aetron* was destroyed."

He went in before her. The interior was illuminated by the dull glow of the emergency lighting.

"There are no coordinates," Thora replied.

She waited in vain for Rico to continue speaking, to show some information of interest. He talked about all sorts of things but no more about that. After a while, she noticed him staring at her intensely.

"Am I right in saying that Crest da Zoltral, as the expedition leader, knows the destination and its coordinates?"

"There is no actual desti..." Thora swallowed, confused.

"Excuse me, Thora da Zoltral, if I ask yet again. Are you sure

that it was a research mission?"

"Yes."

"If necessary, I will be asking more questions."

"You won't always get an answer," Thora said. "I am hereby assuming command of the *Tosoma IX*."

The command center lay in darkness. When she and Rico stepped into the circular room that was spanned by a domed roof, holos appeared on the walls and the ceiling of the control center, creating the illusion that they had an unhindered view of the outside. Thora acknowledged this with satisfaction and surprise. The ship might have been thousands of years old, but its main features were still of a technological standard she was familiar with.

"Rico, you will pilot the ship. I'll be giving the instructions."

"As you wish. The commander's position is over there."

He accompanied her to a contoured lounger in the middle of the control center. Its backrest was up straight. Holographic control elements came to life.

"Prepare for launch!" she ordered.

The control center was suddenly bathed in a friendlier and warmer light. Thora already felt much better. From her position, she looked over at Rico, who was activating the switches on the control panel.

"Commander Rico identified," a badly modulated voice said, and then a few seconds later, "Change of command accepted. Thora da Zoltral, for the glory and honor of Arkon!"

The holo on the central ceiling now showed the cloudy sky of the solar system's second planet.

"The floor plate had been adapted to the surroundings a long time ago, and the mechanical drive was integrated into the floor next to the lock," Rico explained. "The plate is made of an asteroid rock surface."

The controlling positronic counted down the phases of the activated launch process. A murmur came from the belly of the ship, increasing to a mild humming sound. A large part of the sixty-meter sphere was taken up by the transition spacedrives, the impulse aggregator, and the associated energy power piles and accumulator. The auxiliary craft shook slightly until the spacedrives were working in fully synchronized mode.

Rico swiveled his seat. A light shudder crawled across Thora's back, his penetrating gaze making her feel uncomfortable.

“You are angry,” Rico said to her. “Furious, even. I will fly the craft on the shortest route to the third planet. It won’t take long.”

“I’m afraid we don’t have enough time for that anymore!”

“A transition within the system’s interior is risky. The shock wave...”

“I know.” Thora said, interrupting her flight companion gruffly. “The shock wave could attract strangers, but the refuge on the second planet must remain a secret.”

“I see you understand me.”

Thora measured the man with a furious look. “It is not your place to make judgments about my state of mind.”

“That may be so. However, I am ultimately responsible for Zarakh’khazil’s security.”

“Good. You know best what is to be done. I will be doing everything in my power to get out of this solar system as soon as possible anyway. With Crest! These people have always waged wars. Their evolution is nothing but an ocean of blood and suffering, and that is still the case today.”

Humans were barbarians to Thora, and she considered it absolutely appropriate to describe them as animals. The catalogs allowed for such a description, perhaps based less on their technical standards and more in terms of the way they treated one another.

Thora was aware that she had made a serious error. She should never have given in to Crest’s wish to allow these primitives to set foot on the *Aetron*. If Rhodan and his companions had died in the inhospitable cratered landscape, her ship and its crew would still be there today, and she would have fewer problems now.

Crest would probably have lost his fight for survival. And now these barbarians had pulled him before their court. They wanted to kill him. Because they feared him. And they were using their worthless laws to achieve that end. To make it look as if they were appealing to a higher order. How primitive.

Rico told her how much time they would need before the ship entered the atmosphere of the third planet. It corresponded roughly to an hour in the way that time was calculated there.

“The humans and everyone on board the *Aetron* think I am dead. That’s to our advantage. We will make use of the element of surprise.”

“What are you planning to do, Thora?”

“We will free Crest and destroy the prison where they kept him

captive."

Rico tuned into the news broadcasts that were making the rounds on Earth's Net. The pitiful drama that the humans called a "trial" was entering its second day. Crest looked tired and resigned to his fate. He must have believed she had died along with the rest of the *Aetron*'s crew.

"Those barbarians will pay for this!" Thora hissed. The sight of her adoptive father was painful to look at.

"They see Crest as the only surviving attacker. Their astronauts on the Moon are dead. To them, we are the aggressors. How can you argue against that?" Rico asked.

Thora remained silent. The blue planet became larger on the central holo. Wide areas of the surface lay hidden beneath white swirls of cloud.

"It looks like there are others who plan to free Crest," Rico said.

"Rhodan? He's an idiot!"

"At least he will not merely look on and watch Crest being robbed of his dignity without doing something."

"And robbed of his life!" Thora snarled. "You seem to be well-informed about this Rhodan."

"Not at all. I only know of the speech he gave. Afterwards, tens of thousands embarked on a journey to become citizens of the city of Terrania."

"Rhodan is a dreamer. His vision of venturing to the stars is at an end before it even began."

"At least he is enough of a realist to have found the right doctors to heal Crest. Manoli and Haggard are their names, and they have been charged with high treason because they helped a non-human."

Thora called up further control functions. "I am familiarizing myself with the weapons controls."

She knew all of the functions of the newer ships blind. In this ancient auxiliary craft, however, there were things she still had to learn. She had a strangely unsettling feeling in her stomach as she activated several simulations one after another.

The craft approached the planet. This world, with its main colors of azure and white, emanated a strange atmosphere, almost like Arkon even if not anywhere near as harmonious.

From a distance, Earth did not reveal how many wars it had already seen or how many highly contaminated atomic explosions

had already influenced its life. A merciful mood of fate had protected the barbarians so far from inventing a large bomb that would consume everything, destroying their world in an atomic blaze. Thora, meanwhile, believed that these stupid, smug people were perfectly capable of wiping out their own planet. Which, to her mind, would not have been a loss for the peoples of this isle of stars.

The auxiliary craft entered the upper atmosphere. The first particles to hit it burned up against the defensive shield, something that seemed unusual to Thora. *I'm kidding myself—this meaningless world is going to be a nightmare for me.* She was here only because of Crest. There was nothing else, nothing whatsoever, that made Earth interesting for an Arkonide. The behavior of barbarians, even in extreme situations, had already been studied by scientists so often that works about it filled vast amounts of memory space.

The radio scan searched the communications network of the humans using keywords: Crest, Rhodan, Supreme Court, Stanley Drummond, and Frank Haggard. The automatic system worked quite fast. She found very little that was new about Rhodan. It seemed he had been taken prisoner by the Chinese a few Earth days before. After that, there was no trace of him. And even if Rhodan had no influence on the trial against Crest, he himself would also have been sentenced if put on trial. Perhaps the Chinese had already done so. They were a lot less generous with their information than many countries in the West.

"Democratic systems on Earth mostly function according to the principle of the division of powers," Rico explained without being asked. "Legislative, judicial, and executive power may not be exercised by the same people. Courts and judges act independently of the political organs and the state. There are exceptions in the case of terrorism, when the judicial system and the police work closely together to protect the population."

"You know a surprising amount about this world, Rico."

He did not react to the implied question, at least not in the way Thora expected of him. He merely pointed towards the illuminated control elements. "That can all be analyzed. There are critical media and groups on Earth that even monitor the activities of the highest authorities. Humans also have something like intuition. But they are not allowed to express their opinions in every country."

"You don't say, Rico."

The craft plunged through a zone of high-up, thick, cold clouds. Strange electromagnetic light phenomena were visible in the upper atmosphere. The region where the highest mountain ranges were located was beset by heavy snowstorms.

The *Tosoma IX* descended further.

"The humans have spotted us on their radar," Rico said unmoved. "The first interceptors are taking off in the regions of China and Great Russia."

The interceptors were too slow, unable to catch up with even this ancient Arkonide auxiliary craft. The holos were now showing the watery expanses of the Pacific. There were a few spread out groups of islands, some of them lying just below the water's surface.

"The planet is warming, and the water will swallow up many of these islands," Thora commented. At the same time, she was annoyed by her interest in this world. She had no interest in it. The Earth would be meaningless without Crest.

America's west coast came into view, with its expansive mountain range stretching from north to south. Rico let the craft descend lower but kept it at a height that was a few kilometers above Earth's primitive air traffic. Once they were above the Great Lakes, he changed course.

Thora nodded contentedly. "These barbarians will pay a hundredfold for every dead crew member on the *Aetron*," she hissed.

Rico raised his eyes. Thora was surprised and a little indignant when she saw how much pressure resided in his expression. Almost as if he were about to issue orders to her.

"Please act prudently, Thora," he said. "You would be doing great damage if you accidentally killed Rhodan and Bull."

She grimaced. "I don't care about that. What do these humans call it? Collateral damage? I could live with that."

Rico was silent for a while. Then, "It looks like things are moving in the trial against Crest da Zoltral," he said out of the blue. "A surprise witness is being called. Clark Flipper."

Thora knew the name. Flipper was one of the four astronauts under Rhodan's command.

"Dozens of interceptors are on their way towards us!" Rico suddenly announced.

"They can't do anything to us!" But that's what she had thought about the *Aetron* stranded on the Moon. The ship no longer existed;

the crew was gone. Perhaps she should find those on Earth who were to blame and drag them in front of an Arkonide court.

A crazy idea. *Do I want revenge?* Thora was shocked by herself. The primitive human way of thinking was obviously rubbing off on her.

Their destination came into view. A landscape of wooded hills and the District of Columbia, a square-shaped special zone between the states of Virginia and Maryland, Rico casually explained. The optic systems displayed the capital city of the Western superpower in the holos.

Details soon became visible. A large river meandering slowly to the ocean came into sight. A network of access roads on which the earthbound vehicles formed traffic jams across a wide area. What was the use of roads and vehicles if nothing moved?

A large, five-cornered building became visible.

"The Pentagon," Rico said. "This is where the country's defenses are regulated."

An inadequate defense system. The *Tosoma IX* was already unbelievably close. Should she set an example? One single volley from the ship's guns would suffice to sink the Pentagon in a lake of embers.

Thora decided against such an attack. The first interceptors were coming closer. She observed them with little interest.

She had expected the interceptors to attack right away. Nearly all of them, a fact that was not hard to recognize, were armed with rockets. In increasingly threatening gestures, two squadrons were heading straight for the auxiliary craft, only veering off to the sides at the very last moment.

"They won't dare!" Thora said.

"Because our craft could explode and destroy their entire capital just by falling from this height."

"A modicum of sanity?" Thora glanced briefly at Rico.

"It's hard to tell what they're going to do or how long their patience will last."

"As soon as they attack, we'll shoot the planes down!" Thora said.

In the outer suburbs of the city, helicopters were circling. The interceptors showed their presence by flying low. All roads and bridges were jammed. Smoke rose up from points on the ground far apart and meandered slowly through the streets. There were two

warships on the river.

One view showed the area where the court was.

"What's that?" For the first time, Thora felt a sense of insecurity and confusion.

A red glowing sphere was floating in front of the white court building. Clouds of dust hung in the air, dispersing only slowly, as if there had been one or more explosions. People were flowing like a multicolored river in all directions.

"The court is being besieged by people curious to see what's going on, and by demonstrators," Rico explained. "And now they're fleeing from what's happening there."

To Thora, they looked like a microbe culture in the midst of which an antibiotic had been dropped. The healing effect was spreading out evenly.

"What's that?" She saw the broad ring-shaped bulge, a little puzzled. "It looks like an auxiliary craft."

"But it isn't," Rico replied. "Unknown material, hardly any mass. I'm picking up a higher emission."

"That thing is not a spaceship?" Thora narrowed her eyes, curious about what she saw.

"No."

"What is it, then?"

"I assume it is just a simple balloon..."

"But what is it for?"

"Pretending to be something it is not," Rico answered.

"Why?" Thora asked. She understood what he meant, but she didn't want to believe it. These humans were primitive—but so primitive that they thought they could impress everyone with a child's toy?

"A wall of the building has collapsed. I think this was done to free Crest."

"Was it Rhodan?"

"It is the kind of thing he would do," Rico told her.

"Rhodan's naivete will be the death of Crest."

"Soldiers are attacking!" Rico called out without reacting to her remark. "They are coming from two pavilions in the park. It looks like there are underground tunnels there."

Thora squeezed her eyes shut. She asked herself whether Rico was right. If what was happening on the ground really was about Crest, she would have to intervene now. She could not allow

soldiers to destroy everything that was of meaning in her life.

"We're going down lower!" she told Rico.

She asked herself only very briefly why neither the helicopters nor the interceptors were getting involved. The answer was obvious. An Arkonide would never have dared to use heavy weapons similarly close to Crystal Palace. When people shied away from endangering their own elite, perhaps they were not as primitive as might first appear. Some of them, at least.

The soldiers went into position around the red glowing sphere. With a certain amusement, Thora saw that they were maintaining a clear distance for reasons of safety. They fired their simple projectile weapons.

The target was so big that they could hardly miss it. The first volley should have burst the glowing balloon already. But it didn't. Not even when there was a weak explosion quite close to the fake ring.

A second later, flames spewed out of the jets on the ring. The sphere started to climb, if only slightly.

"They're launching!" Thora called out—and wished she had bitten her tongue to stop the ill-considered words from escaping her mouth.

"It really is an empty shell," Rico suddenly realized. There was a hint of reprimand in his voice.

"Why isn't that thing in shreds already?"

"The material was able to absorb the simple projectiles," Rico said. "Perhaps it is highly compact at the molecular level."

"Nonsense!" Thora objected. "Do these anim—these humans have the know-how to do that?"

"No," Rico answered. "Almost certainly not."

Thora acknowledged his words. The natives might be resourceful, but what of it? They would never reach the same stage of development as the Arkonides and all other space-traveling civilizations.

"We're getting Crest out of there!" she decided. "I don't care how. I want him back, healthy and uninjured. Show them no consideration."

"Every individual deserves consideration," Rico contradicted her, albeit in a friendly tone. "The humans sitting in the court conducting the trial against Crest da Zoltral believe they are right. And they probably are, according to their own laws."

“Believe?” Thora snapped. “They haven’t got a clue what they are doing to Crest. He should hate them for it, but he is not capable of hate. Crest da Zoltral is too good for this world, and he deserves better.”

“Something better that he hoped to find when he reached the destination of his expedition?” Rico asked.

Thora gave him a disparaging look. She pressed her lips together, particularly because at that very moment the shields showed a seething, ascending cloud of embers. The red sphere existed no longer, having consumed itself in a huge ball of fire.

“A gas explosion,” Rico said. “Or, more likely, a deflagration.”

The auxiliary craft, which was still several kilometers above the city, dropped downwards. It flew towards the slim, towering column of stone known as the Washington Monument and was soon above the dome of the Capitol, only two thousand meters above the ground, heading downwards towards the court building.

“We will land on the grassy area in front of the collapsed wall, exactly where the dummy ship was!”

Thora stared at the monitors. The first humans were fleeing from a court building whose architecture was not unlike the columned temple on Arkon. They were pushing and shoving one another, and their screams could be heard over the exterior acoustic transmitters. The first people fell on the stone stairway outside the building, and others trampled over them. They really were animals. Few of them tried to help those who had fallen.

A wail went through the crowd as the people noticed the auxiliary craft coming in to land.

“The soldiers are running away.” Rico said. “However, some of them are shooting at us.”

Thora smiled grimly. “Let them shoot, the idiots. They’ll soon see how far that gets them.”

Without a sound, the *Tosoma IX* set down on the expansive grassy area. Suddenly, there were helicopters everywhere. Like a swarm of bloodthirsty, evil, buzzing insects, they encircled the craft. Interceptors thundered across the city district, flying at low altitude. The soldiers had stopped firing and had perhaps finally realized that they could do no harm with their weapons to the vessel. Nevertheless, they went into position all around the craft, their weapons clearly aimed at it.

“Looks like they would rather kill Crest than give him up.”

Thora pointed towards a small group of trees at the edge of the grassy area and to a strange, almost circular construction directly next to a road that passed by the area at some distance away. Some of the people who had fled from the court building were rushing past it.

"Do you know what that is, Rico?"

"A pavilion. People wait there for public transport."

"Nobody is near now. The pavilion and the group of trees..."

Thora directed two of the smaller energy blasts at the targets and activated the projectors with minimal intensity. The small house vaporized in a pale green shimmer. Between the trees, a stream of embers as thick as an arm aimed towards the ground. With a thunderous splintering sound, two of the giant trees tumbled, while tongues of flame shot up from the others, transforming them into blazing columns of flame.

The soldiers withdrew fast. Not a single shot was fired.

"Now they understand," Thora said.

"The helicopters are still there."

"Their pilots will also realize that we are by no means defenseless."

Thora activated the upper gun. A huge column of flame shot up into the midday sky. The flow of embers would be visible far and wide like a beacon, like a bolt of lightning that shot up into the clouds, breaking through them.

The insects scattered, fleeing the area in small groups.

10.

Supreme Court,
Washington, DC

Attacking at the most favorable moment and disappearing... Clifford Monterny realized that was not going to be so easy, despite the Arkonide battledress. But the scene now unfolding at the Supreme Court of the United States seemed so absurd that he began to understand what was going on.

Of course he wasn't the only one who wanted to have the Arkonide. President Drummond could allow himself to sit through the trial. Afterwards, Crest would fall into his hands like a ripe fruit. And in this way, he would have proven to the entire world that the USA, even in a unique situation like this, remained true to the principles of the rule of law. Human dignity was naturally respected, even if Crest was certainly not regarded as a human under the law. For all the world to see, the defender Tifflor had already managed to have the handcuffs removed from the Arkonide at the beginning of the proceedings, as well as other privileges that took into consideration his age and the state of his health.

Rhodan, as Monterny had expected, did actually turn up. He had somehow managed to travel to the USA and remain undetected. He was a dangerous opponent. Even more than that, Rhodan was proving to be a cunning adversary. The detonation that had led to the walls collapsing, the spaceship that had landed... Clifford had almost fallen for the trick. Everything that even remotely looked like Arkonides triggered hysteria and panic. The uncertainty and fear among the people was so great that they were unable to keep cool.

But an Arkonide spaceship did not just explode into thin air like that glowing thing, whatever it was, had done. Rhodan had not been able to come up with anything better in the few days at his disposal, but it was nevertheless pretty impressive. A giant balloon filled with gas... It was their own fault if it was pumped full of

hydrogen instead of helium. Or was that deliberate?

Either way, Rhodan had achieved his goal. The entire court was in chaos within minutes. But he would not get the Arkonide.

With a curse on his lips, Monterny landed on the floor of the courtroom. Lumps of broken plaster crunched underfoot, and there was still a cloud of unsettled dust in the air.

He reacted too slowly and crashed heavily into the strong figure that was suddenly standing between Crest and himself. All he could see was that whoever it was had greenish shimmering skin and was a head taller than he was. He put his arms up too late. The attacker's punch to his face scraped his upper arm as it raced forward, hitting him hard. A biting pain rushed from his chin through his entire skull.

He tumbled. *A teleporter!* was the first thought that came to mind. That explained how Rhodan had managed to get into the courtroom.

He evaded the next punch. His fingers clawed at his opponent's face, digging in, and he felt skin tearing, with strips of it left hanging on to his nails.

It was a mask, and he had torn it into pieces with one hard pull. Deep black skin appeared from underneath. His opponent wrenched himself away. In reality, Monterny had pushed the man away from him to get some air and enough space to grab his raygun. He gripped the weapon, raised it, and shot, but the teleporter managed to react a split second earlier and disappeared.

Monterny turned to Crest, who was looking at him calmly. Nobody was paying any attention to the Arkonide anymore, as the guards were trying to catch Rhodan. Crest could have escaped.

So why didn't he?

Where should he go? Monterny asked himself. *He's alone, stranded on a strange planet.*

Indeed, Crest was a pitiful victim in all this.

"I never believed we would see one another again," the white-haired old man said hesitatingly. He turned around and looked at the grassy area in front of the building. Maybe he was now thinking of escape.

Monterny laid his hands on the Arkonide's shoulders.

"I wouldn't do it if I were you, old man," he said. "Where would you go? You can't just call home on the telephone, and a cell on death row is waiting for you here. I, on the other hand, am

offering you freedom."

Had Crest even heard what he'd said?

"She has come to get me," the old man murmured. "I knew I could rely on her."

She? Monterny had heard shots during his fight with the teleporter, but he hadn't paid any attention to them. He now heard a dull hiss, a noise that sounded like paper-thin material combusting in a giant shooting flame. The roar of the fast combat helicopters that had mercilessly bored its way into his head was moving farther away.

He felt as if he had been catapulted back to Iraq, saw people running for their lives, heard the volleys of machine-gun fire and the dull thumping noise of grenades exploding. He heard the terrible screams of the wounded, sirens in the distance, battle helicopters above the streets...

In a state of shock, he wandered out into the expansive green. A spaceship was standing with its thick landing legs spread out on the ruffled grass. It was spherical in shape and made of dark, grooved steel, like a tank that had been under fire.

This was no trick; this ship was real. It had a patina, traces of use, with damage that had perhaps come from heavy fighting.

"Thora," Crest murmured.

The old man was obviously confused. Thora had been dead for days, killed in the nuclear explosion that had destroyed the large ship on the Moon. And the spherical craft outside? There were probably other Arkonides in the solar system.

"Come on, Crest!" Monterny reached for the Arkonide's arm. He could feel how emaciated the man was.

"Not now," the old man murmured. "There's someone waiting for me."

"That may be. But you are more important to me—as dear to me as life itself." Monterny laughed softly.

When Crest shook his head, Monterny grabbed the long white hair with his hand and pulled the Arkonide back by the head. Far enough to see Crest's eyes widen with fear.

"You are my key to eternal life."

He saw the old man's horror. Fear. Dread. Whatever it was, he held on even tighter, pulling the old man upwards.

"We'll take him in between us and activate the shield to form one unit!" he called out to Deegan. "Then we're out of here as fast

as possible!"

Before they catch us, he added in his head.

Perry Rhodan rubbed his knuckles. The guard he had knocked down must have had a chin of steel. Either that or Rhodan was out of shape. That was more likely.

While he was taking the stun gun from the unconscious guard, he asked himself when he had last worked out hard on a punching bag. It was just before they had set off for the Moon, pretty much exactly one hour after Lesly Pounder had shown him the photo. The last photo to be transmitted from the Moon station, taken by an autonomous probe on the dark side of the satellite. At that time, he had only guessed at what was awaiting him in that crater.

He knew now. But he had taken out his frustration on the punching bag that day.

He checked how charged the stun gun was. The display showed that it was full. It was hard to believe that a trained guard would so easily fall for the trick with the column. Rhodan could still see the look of surprise on the man's face. His amazement that somebody would tap his shoulder from behind after carefully circling the huge support column. As he turned, he had seemed to grasp what had happened, but Rhodan's balled fist had already hit the target spot on his chin.

The courtroom was a picture of devastation. Dust whirled in the air, and the floor and furniture looked like a gray moonscape. The side walls had mostly caved in. From his elevated position, Rhodan could only guess what things looked like on the outside. He heard supersonic jets thunder over the city as well as the hum of the combat helicopters, an unmistakable sound.

Nobody was up there anymore except for him. The courtroom had been packed with people, but the majority of them had already left the building. Nobody had dared to take what was actually the shortest route to the outside, because the threat was visibly waiting for them there.

Rhodan had been aware of the silent buzz of his pod a few minutes before, but had been unable to pick up. He called the number back now. Down in the courtroom, Tschubai had tried in vain to prevent Crest from being kidnapped. Flipper was fighting with the other man, who had also come from the box. The battledresses worn by the two of them must have come from Crest

and Manoli.

Iga answered.

"Tschubai had to teleport. Stay nearby!" Rhodan said.

He rushed down the stairs to intervene. A second guard came towards him. Rhodan was a fraction of a second faster in activating his weapon. Gripped by heavy convulsions, the guard collapsed and slid down the stairs. Rhodan tripped over the cramped body lying on the floor but managed to catch himself before he fell.

Dozens of people were still pushing their way to the exit. The control barriers were preventing the courtroom from emptying faster.

"Stop him! That's the traitor!" somebody yelled.

Rhodan thoughtlessly swiped away the hand that was reaching for him. Some of the men and women reacted to this with applause.

He made it outside just in time to see the two men dragging Crest between them and the protective shields of their suits being activated.

Rhodan crossed several rows of seats. While running, he activated the stun gun, but the electrical field did not have sufficient reach. He could no longer catch up with the men and the Arkonide.

Tschubai had not returned. And Flipper was seriously injured. Shaken, Rhodan knelt down next to his comrade. He could see a hint of a smile in Flipper's eyes.

"Stay calm, my friend," Rhodan said. "The doctors will be here right away."

It was a lie. He could see the state Flipper was in.

"Beth..." It came out almost silently, as Flipper's strength was waning. Rhodan bent down low towards the dying man. "Beth is dead... Found her...buried..." He shuddered. "Help you...get Eric out... Didn't deserve..."

There was a soft gasp, and Flipper was dead. Rhodan ran his hand over Flipper's face and closed his eyes.

"Rest in peace, Clark. We will never forget you."

"Mr. Rhodan," a quiet voice behind him said.

He turned around reluctantly. Tschubai had returned.

The teleporter nodded weakly. "Nobody can escape death. It gets some of us earlier, others later, but all of us must die at some time." He stretched out his hand to Rhodan. "Come on!"

Iga Tulodziecki jumped in fright when she heard the banging behind her. The cargo area was almost empty. She had opened the driver's door, and her legs were hanging out of it. With one leap, she was on her feet.

The rear door of the truck was shoved open from inside, and then Tschubai was standing there, looking at her with his large white eyes. He looked dreadful. If she hadn't known it was a mask that hung in shreds from his face...

"Drive!" he said fiercely. "At least a few streets away. We have to meet up with Bull."

"Is Rhodan—"

"Everything's okay. I brought him back in one piece."

Tschubai disappeared again into the cargo space. The door slammed behind him.

Iga stepped on the gas. She had to control herself to stop from speeding, driving slowly along the access road, past the huge stairway and the columned hall. When she looked up, she saw not only the two large marble figures on either side of the entrance, which represented the contemplation of justice and the authority of law, but also the newly designed statue of George Washington right next to the main entrance.

There were soldiers everywhere. They followed the catering truck with their gaze but made no move to stop them.

Dust-covered faces staggered across the road, the wind blowing plumes of smoke towards them. A few hundred meters away, trees were in flames. Iga thought she could hear the crackling sound of burning wood. Perhaps the noises came from the monstrous sphere that was standing on the lawn.

Iga shivered. The frigates and speedboats in the harbor already made her feel uncomfortable. But this thing here was something quite different. The spaceship could turn into a fire-spitting fortress at any minute.

She didn't breathe again until they turned onto the next side street where the steel globe on its landing legs was no longer visible.

Reginald Bull had stayed in the truck. The oversized vehicle stood in one of the numerous wooded areas that were more important to Washington than just being its green lung. Here, on the outskirts, he was far removed from the public, meaning he was

safe from being detected by conspiracy fanatics or alien hunters.

And even if they did find him, the big fat spider waiting in the cargo space with some of its legs spread wide over the curb would no doubt make them keep their distance.

He had pushed back the side walls and roof of the truck, and the *Phoenix* was ready for launch. Calmly and with great concentration, he checked the connections to the swivel-mounted jets. Nothing was damaged. Adams's technicians had handled the bizarre aircraft with great care while reloading it.

Every now and again, he looked at his tablet. Court proceedings had always been very tedious for him. And what kind of nonsense was it anyway? He knew what the verdict was going to be: guilty. Considering the special circumstances, Crest would only get life imprisonment. But what then? A disaster for the USA, because the smallest puppet state would try to get Crest for themselves. And that meant a clean solution and a new beginning for the game of power poker: a death sentence, a simulated execution, at first calm in the political arena. If you could call it calm. There was always something threatening to explode somewhere. There was always danger of a large-scale situation breaking out.

Bull checked the joystick. The plundered Chinese electronics that connected him to the Arkonide aggregate had proven surprisingly robust.

The approach of an ever louder humming noise snapped him out of his reverie. He looked up, but he could see nothing. And yet the noise sounded like heavy interceptors flying across the Potomac before turning westwards.

Bull finished the adjustments he had started. The tablet was flickering wildly when he looked at it minutes later. The flickering did not stop.

He wrinkled his forehead and fished his pod out of his breast pocket. Adams had handed them out to everyone, because neither Iga nor Tschubai were able to use the radio sets in their combat uniforms. So they used these everyday devices, which at least had a secure connection.

A loud humming sound hung in the air, and Bull thought he could hear sirens in the distance.

His pod rang. There was no video contact, only Rhodan's voice

"Someone has got ahold of Crest. Come immediately!"

11.

Washington, DC

"Can you localize Crest?" Thora asked in a vehement tone. "The acoustic detector..."

"No," Rico answered. "The background noise coming from the building is too unclear and mixed in with all sorts of other sounds. Isolating individual voices would take too much time."

"You're right, time is something we don't have."

Thora tried her radio. Probably a waste of time and effort, but she had to try everything at her disposal. Crest was a prisoner of these humans, and she assumed they had removed his Arkonide battledress.

Natives had gathered on the broad stairway in front of the building. Others in uniform were trying to redirect them away from the landed spaceship.

For Thora, it was a small and decrepit auxiliary craft, no longer suitable for covering long distances, at best able to jump from system to system. But the natives were terrified of the huge sphere, there was no doubt about that.

"Rhodan started it off cleverly." Rico was obviously thinking out loud. That was, in any case, not what the two of them had to discuss. "All these people were already in a state of panic because of the glowing gas balloon even before we landed. And now they really do believe that the invasion of their world is underway."

"They are stupid and superstitious," Thora said. "I can't change that." She tried again to establish contact via radio. "Come on, old man!" she hissed, almost begging. "You know that we're here. You know this type of auxiliary craft, even if it's a really old model."

She asked herself what might be going through Crest's mind. The ship was from a long-forgotten time... The search for eternal life... The wrong solar system... As a scientist, he was used to searching for the connections between things that did not necessarily belong together at first glance. That was one of the basic

principles of scientific research and the quest for knowledge, and was, in particular, characteristic of intelligent life-forms.

Thora left the craft via the lock about halfway down the ship's side.

"I'm going out there," she informed Rico, who was following her silently with his eyes as she walked out of the control center.

"The soldiers will try to arrest you."

"Let them try. I think they just might regret it."

She swung out of the lock, expecting the soldiers to start shooting at her right away. But apart from some loud yells, which she did not and did not want to understand, everything remained calm. The way she dropped weightlessly to the ground looked like sorcery to the natives. That was always the case. The barbarians thought it was magic, even if they were a people capable of development with whom they could trade a few generations later: natural products and genetic material from flora and fauna in exchange for items such as solar lamps, hermetically sealing plastic containers, sometimes even ready-made building components for simple settlements.

At some distance from the ship, soldiers were waiting under cover. Thora could see exactly where one of them was craning his neck to get a better view before aiming his weapon at her. She was amazed that none of them lost their nerve and actually fired.

To avoid provoking them, she took cover behind one of the landing supports. The rutted appearance of the craft, which even looked burned out in some places, no doubt instilled fear in the humans. But that's the way it was when a ship had survived many space battles; it was something you had to live with. These humans also found themselves involved in permanent battles, probably without ever thinking about what they were doing.

The noise from the building and the large stairway at the front of it was dying down. Thora looked around, a little confused, seeking the reason for it. She saw some people looking towards her, making strange gestures. They were moving their right hand from their forehead to almost the middle of their body, and then immediately from the left-hand side of their body to the right. It was perhaps a symbolic act with which they hoped to gain protection. She paid it no more attention.

The main focus of her interest was still the damaged wall of the building. It had collapsed in on itself as if hit by a targeted

detonation. Thora could easily have flown into the opening this had caused with a glider. This had been a deliberate act.

So Rhodan was behind it. Rico had already implied that he would try to free Crest. Which meant that Crest must have been in this part of the building, and if he had not been injured by the blast...

She hesitated. It was possible that Rhodan had been successful and had freed him. Would she have to thank him for this, a thing that was to be taken for granted?

She detected movement among the rubble and took a closer look. She could see humans there and...

Crest!

He was standing a few steps in the background, but he was looking to the outside. As far as she could see, he was uninjured. He was at least standing up straight and seemed to be calm and composed. Luckily, he seemed to be okay, a lot better than the last time she had seen him.

Crest did not look as if he was in full health, but despite that he emanated a sense of calm and dignity. It was this dignity that Thora had missed most of all. He had been on such friendly terms with these humans, treating them as if they were on the same level as the Arkonides.

It felt good to see Crest da Zoltral again. Thora sensed some of the anger that had been building up in her ebb away. The light tone of the suit Crest was wearing seemed to her like the color of hope.

Her emotions were in turmoil. Only a few hundred steps away, between the rubble of the collapsed walls, stood the man who was responsible for making her everything she was. He had encouraged her, treated her like his own daughter, and had even given her his family name.

Thora took a quick look around to assess the situation. She had not been wrong. Numerous soldiers were standing there with their weapons pointed at Crest. He held up a hand and spread his fingers in greeting. His gaze rested on the auxiliary craft, but then turned upwards as if he were seeking the stars.

Thora was startled. Was it really a greeting? Or a gesture of goodbye? He hadn't seen her yet!

Crest da Zoltral! She wanted to call out, draw his attention to her, but she couldn't. Instead, she moved a few steps away from the shadow of the landing support.

Crest was still not looking in her direction, when suddenly another human appeared directly behind him. The man moved towards him and said something. He grabbed Crest by the upper arm the way you do when you want to coerce somebody to do something against their will.

Crest shook his head. The human buried his fingers in the old man's long white hair and pulled him backwards. However, Crest managed to free himself with a sudden jerk and stepped forward. Thora had the impression that he saw her now but was somewhat confused by her antiquated battledress. And even more confused by the *Tosoma IX*. He obviously didn't make the right connections in his head. But that was natural—after all, he must have believed her to be dead.

"Crest!" It was more of a croak than a yell that came out. Her throat was dry and scratchy. At worst, she had become infected with one of the diseases of this world.

Crest stood there as if he had been turned to stone. Only his facial expression changed, taking on a distorted look. Thora thought it looked like he wanted to escape, but something was not quite right...as if he were being held back by an energy field.

She ran towards him, cursing the fact that she had not updated the old battledress by adding a flight system. The soft ground had been churned up, and she was unable to move fast enough. When she looked up again, she got a shock. A second man had appeared. The two humans grabbed Crest and held him between them. What she had failed to notice before was that both of them wore Arkonide battledresses.

"Rico!" Thora yelled through the radio. "I need—"

The humans activated their energy shields in overlap mode. Crest, despite not wearing a battledress of his own, was enclosed in the shield with them. Together they floated upwards, high above the ruins and towards the *Tosoma IX*. However, they turned in another direction when they were about halfway there.

"Rico!" Thora did not wait for an answer. "Start the machine as soon as I'm in the lock chamber! And follow those two men; they're escaping with Crest!"

She floated upwards far too slowly in the anti-grav field. When she finally reached the lock, she saw the men disappear with Crest behind a group of trees. The landing supports were already retracted, and the craft lifted off slowly with the help of the anti-

grav.

Thora rushed into the control center. The shield gallery showed a panoramic image of Washington.

"They're flying towards the Potomac!" Rico said. "They may have a speed boat tied up there."

"They haven't got a chance. I want Crest back!"

"If it's a submarine, it will be difficult to locate," Rico warned her.

"They really are fleeing to the river!"

The helicopters, which had withdrawn from the area around the spacesphere, had suddenly returned. The rangefinder identified all the places they were emerging from. Thora asked herself if there was one single human she could trust. The battle machines, armed with rockets, had only been waiting for the right moment to attack her.

Now they were following Crest's kidnappers, both of whom were wearing battledresses. Rhodan and Bull?

Thora had been unable to get a good look at their faces between all the light and shadow, but she was still convinced she had recognized them. The inhabitants of this planet were difficult to tell apart from one another. She would have been convinced that the kidnappers were Rhodan and Bull if the two figures had not handled Crest so roughly. And why had they chosen to fly so close to the ground? The only explanation was that they were trying to escape detection by the rangefinder. But they must have noticed that they were being followed anyway.

One thing was certain—the two astronauts who had flown to the Moon were regarded as criminals in this country. They had already risked everything just by entering America, their homeland. Were they willing to risk their lives to save Crest's?

Or rather, to save his life a second time, if the medical treatment he had received turned out to be successful. They would have to wait to see how that ultimately worked out. Thora did not think much of the herbal sorcery of primitive peoples. But now and again these creatures did not realize how effective the substances they played around with could actually be.

"Transmit a collective call on the military frequency!" Thora ordered her companion. "These noisy steam engines should stay back, out of the way. It's more efficient if one good machine pursues the escapees. The auxiliary craft is far superior to all

Earthly flying devices."

Rico activated the frequency switch and tuned into the Americans' radio communications.

"Hey, who's that on our frequency? Disappear, man, otherwise we'll blow your asses sky-high!"

"My name is Rico! Who are you?"

"None of your damned business. Are you with the Russians? Your accent..."

"I belong to the Arkonides," Rico said.

There were seconds of silence.

"Say that again!" came out of the radio link.

"We are not here to talk!" Thora said, intervening. "You and your kind must retreat! Immediately!"

"And if we don't?"

"The *Tosoma IX* may be old, but her weapons system is superior to anything on this planet. Retreat!"

"Okay, okay, whoever you are. We don't want to leave any more scratches on your noble ship."

Thora's hand hammered down on the illuminated plate that cut off the radio contact. "They are arrogant and stupid," she said, more to herself than to Rico.

At least the slim helicopters fell noticeably behind and from then on kept their distance. Thora had not gotten rid of them altogether. It would have been so easy for her to get away from them in seconds with a short acceleration phase. But her speed oriented itself towards the speed of the escapees, and running in battledress was not the fastest way to make progress.

The three fleeing figures turned northwards once they were above the Potomac. They remained in the middle of the river, just above the surface of the water. A wooded island came into view.

Rico pointed to one of the screens that showed only the island. "These men know that they have only one chance, and that is if they manage to hide themselves. They have chosen a route that promises them the greatest protection from visibility."

"There are other ways to not lose sight of them," Thora said gruffly. "If we have to, we'll burn the island to the ground."

Just around the next bend in the river, a broad green belt stretched in a northerly direction.

"We're going down deeper," Thora urged him. "And come in closer! I want them to know that they can't get away."

Rico lowered the craft until it was just above the highest treetops. Thora, who had taken over the rangefinder, finally localized the battledress frequency of the men they were following and tuned into it. The humans were not in complete control of the battledress functions, otherwise they would have encrypted their radio communications. She soon found out that the two men were called Clifford Monterny and Roster Deegan. Monterny spoke very little, and when he did, it was only to tell Deegan not to reveal any information.

"These humans have a great deal of initiative, do they not?" Rico commented. "That's what lifts them above the evolutionary status of the animals."

"It might be some kind of simulated intelligence, a certain survival mode."

"That would mean they have had contact with superior intelligent life-forms for a long time."

"Which takes us back to the Venus refuge and the fact that you speak such up-to-date American, Rico."

"Probes regularly rise up into Venus's atmosphere, and they pick up and save radio communications from Earth. I had access to the knowledge extracted from that."

The escapees tried to dodge, but they could not shake off the auxiliary craft. And at a distance of some kilometers, the helicopters followed like the tail of a comet.

Thora racked her brains wondering what Crest's kidnappers wanted with him. He was a scientist, not an engineer. He could not build spaceships for them, or weapons systems. And his knowledge of his own field was so advanced that they would not understand it until hundreds of years from now.

Or had Crest somehow revealed his real plans? Had the humans found out about the Planet of Eternal Life? But if they had, they would have prevented the destruction of the *Aetron*.

Thora once again looked at the screens. The kidnappers were not just taking any old route—that was gradually becoming clear to her. These two reacted without compromise; something about the way they moved made them similar to Arkonides. There was no doubt that they had planned their escape route. They were heading for something specific: a plane, a rocket. Something that made them sure they would be able to evade even the most persistent pursuers.

"The analysis of the terrain is complete," Rico said. "I'll place it

on your holo."

Thora perused the data. The escapees had disappeared into an expansive and very densely wooded area a few minutes before. The already sparse localization results achieved by the auxiliary craft had gotten even worse. It was as if Crest's kidnappers had switched off the functions of their battledresses. Maybe there was a problem with the energy supply. While that was conceivable, Thora tended to think the move was deliberate. She started to have the impression that these humans learned fast. Too fast.

There were no special geological features in the wooded area. It contained a number of timber factories spread out over a large area, and a large stone quarry possibly offered good places to hide. The kidnappers had to expect an attack.

Thora found nothing that logically explained their disappearance. The thought that they might have outwitted her made her very uncomfortable. She instructed Rico to descend further. The craft was now flying some meters below the treetops and breaking a giant path through the forest. All that remained were splintered and charcoaled tree trunks and an unmistakable line of destruction all the way down to the forest floor.

"No reaction," Rico noted. "If they actually are down there, they know that there's not much we can do to them."

The two men had disappeared with Crest within a very limited area. Thora did not believe they had dragged Crest all the way through the woods. It was far more likely they were waiting somewhere down there for their followers to give up the chase.

"Keep going!" she urged. "I want Crest. I don't care about anything else."

Again the auxiliary craft practically ate its way through the trees. Thora carefully watched the displays on the control unit of the protective field. The power output was fluctuating—a price they had to pay due to the age of the ship. And yet it did not look as if the protective field would break down any time soon.

She adjusted the lower disintegrator gun. A shimmering green ray of energy shot through the wood without reaching as far as the ground; Thora didn't want to take that risk. The disintegrator shot dissolved all material, leaving behind nothing but dust blowing in the air. The cracking and bursting of the treetops must have been audible for miles around.

"I have a weak energy reading on the screen!" Rico announced.

"Where?"

"About four hundred meters west of their last position. They're moving faster."

Thora laughed derisively. She was sure that these humans could not escape her. The kidnappers wanted to go farther westwards. There was a large and broad clearing where the huts and storage halls of several companies could be seen. The ship's optics showed large construction machines of different types, trucks with several axes and some smaller vehicles. Every single hall was large enough to accommodate space vehicles like a small planet ferry or even a space fighter with several seats.

However, the kidnappers were not thinking about hiding themselves. They were racing along the dusty road in one of the small four-wheeled vehicles. The holos showed them so clearly, they might as well have fired a beacon.

"They no longer know how to get away from us," Thora said with satisfaction in her voice. "They'll soon give up."

The vehicle swerved towards the north. For a few seconds, their view of the vehicle was so good that the people traveling in it could be seen quite clearly. Three people, one in front driving, two in the back.

Thora searched the ground in the direction they were driving in. There were obviously a few vacant buildings up ahead. The mass detector at least seemed to indicate that they did not contain any special technical equipment. No measurable electrical current, nothing that pointed towards any activity.

The vehicle stopped in front of the last building, which had two stories but was not very big. The access road ended there in a narrow yard. There was no way the *Tosoma IX* could land there without causing a great deal of damage. The only place there was sufficient space on the ground was at the start of the narrow access road. That place and the hall where the two humans now disappeared with Crest were a good half-mile apart.

"There's something coming towards us!" Rico called.

"The helicopters?"

"The humans are keeping a steady distance from us. No, it's something else. I'm measuring stray radiation, which would indicate a better drive."

It was a strange entity that approached, flying very low, just above the ground and at high speed. Thora suddenly suspected that

this vehicle had not only just appeared, but had been following them unnoticed for some time. It threw up a lot of dust as it raced towards the warehouse, flying close to the ground the entire time. It came to a halt in a risky maneuver and slid through the large open side door into the building.

"They've disappeared!" Rico said in that very same second.

"Who?" Thora didn't understand.

"The two men—and presumably Crest along with them."

"That's impossible. They can't have already left the warehouse; we would have seen them."

"The energy emissions of their protective fields are no longer there."

"Switched off," Thora suggested. "What else?"

She asked herself who the newcomers with the spider-like machine might be. The images on her screens showed that they too were wearing battledress. Rhodan? Bull? Why was she even interested? As soon as she had Crest, she would be leaving this world to its own devices anyway.

"Circling up there like vultures." Reginald Bull gave a slight grin. "We only have to be fast enough to beat the swarm before they dive in—after all, we want the biggest fish for ourselves."

Rhodan gave his friend a disapproving look but said nothing. The *Phoenix* sped across the landscape, flying close to the ground. Bull did not need to show what he was capable of and certainly did not have to push the flying device to its limits. They had obviously not been detected by the pack yet.

"The energy supply in their suits won't last forever," Bull murmured after it had looked for several minutes as if the hunt would end in an expansive area of woodland. "The Arkonide technology is by no means a perpetuum mobile." He patted the ship's frame. "However, what happened to the *Aetron* was the biggest mistake we humans could have made. The state charges Crest with murder and overlooks the fact that it belongs in the dock itself."

The chase continued. What still remained unanswered was where the small spacesphere had come from. Were there Arkonides on board? Probably. The exterior appearance of the craft indicated that, as did their desire to get a hold of Crest.

"The sphere is as big as the auxiliary craft of the *Aetron* were,"

Rhodan said.

The same thoughts were going through Bull's head. "But it looks old. Reminds me of the bombers from the Second World War."

"What?" Rhodan asked, paying more attention to the pack of helicopters than to his friend.

"What I'm saying is that this ship looks to me like it was taken out of a museum."

"Of course," Rhodan said. They were talking through the radio, set at minimum range. It was the only working feature left in their battledresses.

Rhodan was wondering the same thing. Had the *Aetron* not come alone, despite giving that impression? Had other large ships followed Crest and Thora?

"We've got them!" Bull called.

The combat helicopters fanned out but remained a respectable distance from the spacesphere, which was slowly descending.

The *Phoenix* flew between the high trees at high speed and close to the ground. They could only see a narrow strip of sky. This aisle through the forest had been used by larger vehicles. It was only a dirt road, and it was fast being reclaimed by weeds again.

"I would like to know where we are," Bull said. "We know every crater on the Moon, but here..."

There were smaller buildings to the right. The dirt road ended less than a kilometer ahead. A large warehouse stood there. For a few seconds, Rhodan had a good view of the sphereship hovering above the area, before tree branches got in the way again.

"That's their jeep!" Bull called.

Rhodan also spotted the vehicle. It was standing several meters in front of the building and had left clear skid marks on the road. Was there a reason Monterny or Deegan had not driven farther?

Reginald Bull steered the *Phoenix* through the wide-open door and set it down inside, throwing up a cloud of dust. Rhodan's first impression as he swung himself out of the frame and walked a few meters to the side was that it was completely empty. There was nothing resembling furniture of any kind, no machines and no stored goods—nothing. The warehouse was big...and empty.

"Where did they go?" Bull asked.

There was a small gallery at the gable end which looked like the beginning of a second level. But they could see clearly into the

space, and nobody could have been hiding there.

"Monterny!" Bull called out. "Deegan! Crest!"

No answer. Not the slightest noise, apart from the distant hum of helicopters.

"Could there be a secret passageway?"

Rhodan shook his head. "Too much time and expense for an old warehouse in the middle of the woods."

If there had been any visible tracks in the dusty ground, the *Phoenix* had blown them away when it landed. Rhodan yelled through the building. The two large windows were locked, and there were no other openings except for the entrance they had used.

Bull gestured upwards. "The spaceship can't land. But the fact that it's hanging over us proves that Monterny and Crest must be here. And yet they're gone! Disappeared into thin air!" He snapped his fingers.

"You said it." Rhodan slapped himself on the forehead with the palm of his hand.

"Said what?" For once Bull didn't immediately understand what his companion was referring to.

"Gone!"

"Yes, of course," Bull said slowly, before he burst out, "A teleporter! That's what you mean. Monterny succeeded in making a fool out of everyone. That's why the jeep was parked so visibly right outside. He's been playing us from the start."

Rhodan released the range limiter on his radio set.

"This is Terranian Perry Rhodan speaking. If this information is interesting for the commander of the auxiliary craft that is hovering above the storage hall: the kidnappers have escaped with Crest without a trace."

The answer didn't come until a few seconds later. "Rhodan," a gruff voice said. "You again!"

"Thora?" he asked, taken aback. "You're not dead?"

"You and these...humans would like that, wouldn't you? Where's Crest?"

12.

July 14, 2036,
Thora

"What do you expect?" Rico asked. "That these humans are more advanced than we Arkonides? You yourself described them as animals, as primitive and barbarian. Your expectations of these people and your simultaneous rejection of them contradict one another."

Thora looked at him, deep in thought. The commander of the Venus refuge was siding with the humans. The more she went through the past hours in her mind and examined Rico's comments, the clearer it seemed to her that he looked upon these beings as equals. And more than anything else, he kept trying to get her to like them.

Perhaps she was mistaken and reading too much into what he was saying. She wasn't in the best state of mind herself, perturbed and confused. In her mind, she was aware that she had made errors. Errors that had led to the destruction of the *Aetron* and the death of the crew.

It was her fault that Crest had been charged by the humans and pulled up in front of their ridiculous court. The death penalty awaited him. When she thought about why he had flown to this particular corner of the galaxy...even the thought made her blood run cold.

If there was anyone who would have been able to prevent that, it was her. Not the crew, who were happy to pass their time in idleness. Did she feel a sense of regret? No. She had acted wrongly and had been too indulgent with Crest and with these humans. Mistakes she would correct.

"Have you prepared everything, Rico?"

"Yes. And you? Are you sure it's the right decision?"

Thora turned around on her heel, a sharp response on the tip of her tongue. But confronted with the relentless expression in his

eyes, she did not say what she had in mind.

"I am absolutely certain that I will do the right thing," was all she said. "Crest da Zoltral deserves this decision. I will not let him leave his hopes and his life behind on this planet."

"Does that mean you are willing to destroy Earth, Thora?"

Rico's tone contained a definite hint of accusation. And yet, he accepted her orders. She was, after all, the commander of the auxiliary craft.

The humans on this planet had humiliated Crest. Humans had kidnapped him. But it was also a human who had cured him of his illness, she remembered. However, that was only one human out of eight billion.

There was no trace of Crest and his kidnappers. They had disappeared from the empty building as if they had never existed. Humans were responsible for that. Humans would have to pay the price for it.

"They have their fate in their own hands, so now they can show how much intelligence they really do possess. If they cooperate, Crest will be free in a few hours. Or don't you believe that, Rico?"

He avoided answering immediately. Thora was accusing him more than before of being a friend of the humans. Maybe she was thinking to herself that he had not always been alone in the isolation of the Venus refuge. Who was there to stop him from bringing women from Earth to Venus?

"The connection has been activated," he said without emotion. "The *Tosoma IX* is transmitting to the Earth's communications network."

There were tears in her eyes. Thora was emotional as she activated the screens that would give her a view of the outside. She hesitated. She had taken a close and exact look at this area an hour ago. Several malfunctions had been displayed, but they only referred to internal processes. Those notifications were gone now, and the visuals worked perfectly.

"Did you fix that, Rico?" Thora asked, surprised. She should have noticed that the switch errors meant the covering had to be removed.

"Fix what?" Rico asked.

"The visuals..."

"I had other things to do."

Thora rubbed her temples. She was allowing herself to become

confused, and that wasn't good. She could show no signs of insecurity. She let her head rest on her shoulders, closed her eyes and thought about Arkon. Slowly her sense of calm returned.

"Now," she said. The visuals were immediately activated by her short command, and a holo appeared, signaling that it was ready for transmission.

"I, Thora da Zoltral, am speaking to the people of this planet. Some of your kind have kidnapped Crest da Zoltral, a respected member of my people. That is regrettable...not for me, but for you humans. I expect to see Crest again unharmed. But I will not wait for long. I give humanity twenty-four hours to soothe my anger. That is more than enough time for you to bring Crest to me. If that does not happen and the deadline passes without Crest being returned to me, I will begin to cremate your planet. Humanity has its future in its own hands. Twenty-four hours—not a minute longer!"

As was her routine, she gave the order to deactivate the transmission with a wave of her hand. The automatics reacted promptly, Thora noticed with some surprise. She turned to Rico.

"I don't believe that was necessary," he said accusingly.

13.

July 15, 2036,
An honorable burial

Life went on as usual, and death was a part of that. The Earth did not stop turning just because the Arkonides had arrived.

Stanley Drummond stood there as if he had been turned to stone. He fixed his gaze on the ground, placed his hand on his heart, and listened to the national anthem. The gesture of solidarity was painful to him, but it had to be. And the anthem was not a concession to Clark G. Flipper, but rather an affront to Thora.

We shall not bend! The nation holds together, even if—or particularly if—the enemy is superior in strength.

There was a light breeze in the air. It brought the smell of burning with it, keeping alive the memories of the day before. Drummond pressed his lips together. With his left hand, he tried to straighten his tie but then realized it was an inappropriate gesture and let his arm drop again.

An interplay between light and shadow flitted across the grounds of the national cemetery. Arlington was a place of remembrance and pain but also a place that inspired hope. The white gravestones stood in straight rows, jutting out of the luscious green lawn. Every stone represented a human fate, a life in service of the home country.

The anthem ended. Drummond continued standing, unyielding. He had noticed that a rotor camera hung in the air a few meters in front of him. His face could be seen in razor-sharp detail on all the news streams.

The honorary guard saluted the coffin, which was decorated elaborately with flowers and covered with the flag. Death had come suddenly and unexpectedly. America mourned its hero, Clark G. Flipper. Or at least, that was the story put forward by the media. Only a few people knew the truth.

Stanley Drummond cursed the day he had placed his trust in

the wrong person. Admittedly, it had been a mistake. And it was a mistake that only he and Monterny knew of.

The annoying camera scanned the row of mourners. Only a few dozen had come: some senators, the Governor of Nevada and his Asian partner, several of Flipper's comrades from his time in the Air Force, and, of course, Flight Director Lesly Pounder and several high-ranking members of his staff from NASA.

Pounder had lost many good men and women—a bitter price to pay for the fight to become the dominant power in space. The fact that Russia and China suffered in the same way did not necessarily make the situation any easier to bear. India would use it to their advantage. Their next Moon mission...

The last post echoed across the National Cemetery. Stanley Drummond squeezed the top of his nose with his thumb and forefinger and wiped the moisture from the corners of his eyes. These new circumstances were a source of worry, Thora's ultimatum a thing to be taken seriously.

There was a gun salute. Startled, a swarm of birds rose up screeching from the thick wooded area that made Arlington an oasis of peace. Many in the media had criticized the funeral for being held only one day after Flipper's death. Apart from the fact that any examination into the circumstances under which he had died was not wanted, Drummond was also using the burial ceremony as a signal to the nation. Once again unity was paramount, more important now than ever.

In the Gobi, General Bai Jun had become a traitor. That in itself was an unthinkable thing. Even more confusing was the fact that Bai Jun had called on all humanity to rise up against their lawful leaders.

Even in the USA, among the ranks of their own armed forces, a sense of unrest was tangible. How many soldiers who now paid their last respects to Clark Flipper were already secretly thinking about rebellion? Drummond was no longer certain that he could count on their loyalty.

The coffin was lowered. It was an emotional moment, as always. Every life that ended so abruptly was a loss.

The next problem was Monterny. Stanley Drummond knew him well enough to know that he had first of all removed himself from the line of fire. There were many places he could be hiding out. And it was possible, Drummond feared, that he himself was not aware of

all of the potential places the project leader might have access to. Monterny had the Arkonide, and he had the mutant as well. He had obviously promised himself a great deal from Crest, otherwise he would not have so openly stabbed the President of the United States in the back.

Drummond had already made his decision. It was vital that he find out quickly and discreetly where Monterny was hiding and then smoke him out using an elite troop. The campaign would have to be completed in forty-eight hours at the latest, before the public got wind of it.

The giga-truck was still standing at the edge of the forest, and nobody seemed to have noticed it. Only a few dozen meters away, the spider-legged *Phoenix* rested under the protective cover of the gnarled trees. Bull had maneuvered it there with extreme precision, as if that's what he did every day.

He had been waiting for about twenty-four hours for Thora to appear in the skies above Washington, which is why he had spent the night in the pilot's seat of the *Phoenix*, where he had had anything but a good sleep. Again and again he had been woken by the thunder of supersonic jets coming from the capital. The military was showing its presence. However, he asked himself whether the pilots had been given the order to fire their weapons if they happened to locate the spacesphere again in the skies above the city...which could happen at any moment.

Thora seemed to be fond of surprises. She had literally risen from the dead. There had been nothing more than brief radio contact with her since Monterny had disappeared without a trace from the empty warehouse. Thora had stubbornly ignored Rhodan's questions about her whereabouts over the past few days. And she had said just as little about the origins of her battered spaceship. It was not one of the *Aetron's* auxiliary craft. It looked older; much, much older. Bull did not think his guess was wrong in that respect.

The question about where it had come from therefore remained unanswered. He could only come up with one explanation: he didn't know how she had done it, but Thora had managed to get a hold of the small craft somewhere in the solar system. On Mars, perhaps—where else?

She might have been a little more talkative. But she blames us for having put Crest before a court and kidnapping him, Bull thought.

“Are you waiting for a formal invitation, Reg?” Rhodan called from the truck. “Thora has better things to do than worry about us. We’ve come up against a dead end. All we can really do now is wait.”

Rhodan looked at his companions one after the other. Bull was scratching the scars on his face, lost in thought, but he tensed up, ready to deal with anything. Adams, the smallest person in the group, cut a very dubious figure with his designer suit, which had been repaired with patches.

A long time ago, Rhodan had seen a manipulated photo showing people with four eyes. He had looked at the picture, known that something was wrong with it, but could no longer say what it was he had noticed as being strange. Of course it was the four eyes, which lessened his perception of everything else that was going on in the photo. The feeling here wasn’t quite so intense, but when he looked at Adams, he had a similar sensation. The true Adams remained hidden somewhere underneath.

Tschubai was also there. He leaned against the slatted wall and chewed on an herb he had torn from the ground outside. Iga was back to being the trucker, a role she felt more comfortable in. Her hair was just as stylish as the day before, but she was wearing her blue overalls again. Her thumbs hooked into her pockets, she looked around at the group.

“At some point, we will find something that traces back to Monterny,” Adams said.

“And then?” Iga asked. “What will happen? Monterny is not alone in this. I’ve seen what Ras can do—and yet I still have the feeling this all can’t be true.”

“It is true,” the teleporter murmured.

“Monterny had several mutants working with him,” Iga continued. “What I would like to know is what they are capable of, if the telekinetic...”

“Roster Deegan,” Tschubai offered.

“If this Deegan was already capable of killing Flipper.”

Rhodan looked at Homer G. Adams. The discussion taking place in the truck’s trailer had the air of a crisis meeting, because their entire plan had failed to hit the mark. They had nothing more than an empty warehouse to show for their efforts. And there was Thora’s ultimatum. They were not even unanimous about whether she would act on her threat or not.

The world would know a lot more about that in only a few hours—and would possibly suffer terrible things in the process.

"We must talk with Sid," Adams said. "Or with Sue. But both of them are in the Gobi, and I don't even know whether they and Marshall and the others made it."

"On the other hand, we still have a lot at our disposal," Bull interjected. "We could identify Monterny and Deegan with your information, Mr. Adams, and I wouldn't be surprised if the two of them were being accompanied by the female telepath. We know Monterny has mutants with other abilities and that he has special powers himself. An intense power of attraction..."

"Which, as with Sid, might one day cause exactly the opposite feeling," Adams added. "Sid fears and hates the man like no other."

"A familiar threat is only half as bad." Bull rubbed his chin, on which red stubble had sprouted. "He has the two battledress suits and very likely Crest's raygun as well. And the Arkonide as a hostage, of course."

"By doing that, he's turned the world against him," Rhodan said. "Which will only get worse when Thora makes good on her threat, if she does."

"Do you have any doubts about that?"

"I don't know what I should think, Reg. She's...unapproachable—now even more than before."

"Maybe it's self-preservation."

Rhodan looked at his friend with an inquiring look but said no more. "Something will turn up, I'm sure of it."

Less than a half hour later, Allan Mercant called them. He had made use of some old contacts and found a name: Fort Sunrise.

"It looks like Monterny and his people have holed up there. But not everyone is happy about it."

"Does that mean the intel comes from Monterny's close circle?" Rhodan asked.

"Sunrise was set up in the Adirondacks. Monterny kept Crest captive at Fort Sunrise before the trial. He needed helpers to do that. Not everyone is happy about the way he does things."

Iga rolled her eyes, Tschubai merely nodded.

"Okay," Bull commented. "That gives us something to go on."

"The Adirondack Mountains are in the northeast of the state of New York," Rhodan said. "Just a stone's throw away if we take the *Phoenix*."

Bull pursed his lips. “We’re two against a group of superior strength. Or am I missing something?”

“We’ll take a look around. That can’t do any harm, and it’s better than twiddling our thumbs in the truck.”

“I’ve been there,” Bull countered. “On the Moon, we were supposed to ‘just look around’ as well.”

14.

Flashback: *July 13, 2036*,
Sid González

Sid had made it. He had teleported far out into the desert with the atomic bomb and, in doing so, saved the lives of thousands. They were now in safety beneath the energy dome. Sue and Colonel Huang Chao had found him lying unconscious, with burnt or scalded skin, between the seemingly endless dunes.

The helicopter flew him to the field hospital...

Suddenly, there were sparks flying and Huang Chao's surprised shout as Sue dove with Sid into the sand. She tried to catch herself but was unable to move her arms. Sid was holding her tight, as if he could protect her from injury. At the same time relieved and worried, he looked at her.

"I'm glad you found me."

"Sid!" Sue had experienced fearful panic, but she was trying to hide that fact now. "We looked for you for hours."

"The bomb..."

"It exploded far away from the city."

"A strange bomb."

Sue didn't know what he meant by that. "It was a mistake to leave the helicopter. You need a doctor. Huang Chao wanted to bring you to the field hospital. Does it hurt?"

He carefully rubbed his dark red skin with the tips of his fingers and grimaced. "A little," he said.

"The radiation almost burned you."

"Radiation?"

"From the bomb."

"I don't know. The rash is more from the heat when I teleported."

"It'll be from both." Sue discovered the single shoe they had found in the sand. Sid had taken it out of the helicopter. A second object was lying next to it—a pistol.

“Did you steal Colonel Huang’s weapon?”

“You could say that.”

“Sid, why on Earth do you need a pistol?”

“I want to kill him. He’s evil. I’m going to shoot Clifford Monterny.”

Sue pulled back from him. “You can’t do something like that. You shouldn’t even be thinking about it!”

“If I don’t, a lot more innocent people will die.”

Sue reached out to him, the stump of her arm touching his right hand. “One crime only leads to another. Someone has to stop.”

Sid stood in front of her, looking like misery personified. “That’s good,” he whispered.

“You mean it feels good when I touch you?”

He nodded silently, as if he was afraid that words could drive away the magic of her touch.

Sue couldn’t say afterwards how long they stood there. An hour, perhaps. Sid’s cramped features relaxed, and his breathing became more even. His eyes closed several times, and she held him tight and let him sleep. But his inner unrest made him jump up again and again.

“We have to go, Sue!”

“Where do you want to go?”

“Home!”

“How?”

“The highway is nearby!”

They waded through the sand until the road came into view. A tarred road in the desert was unusual. Sid explained in his slightly clumsy manner that the best thing to do would be to travel first by truck and then by bus. After that, he wanted to return from some international airport more or less directly to the USA.

“We should try to find the general,” Sue suggested. “He’ll make sure you get medical care fast.”

“If I want that, I can manage it myself,” he said.

They waited long until an old truck finally came thundering along the road towards them. The rear part of the tarpaulin was missing, allowing them to see into the cargo area. Sue saw sparks and suddenly found herself sitting beneath the torn tarp, watching the desert flash by.

Later on, they changed to a bus, which did not reach the city until it was already dark. Then they jumped to the airport, after

which Sid needed a break to recharge his batteries.

They used the last of Sue's money to buy something to eat and drink. After spending the night in a park, Sue woke at dawn, holding Sid's hand in hers.

Back at the airport, Sid found a plane that flew to Amsterdam with a stopover in Singapore. In the meantime, Sue looked around the counter area of customs clearance. There were no armed patrols that morning, a sign that things were returning to normal. Nobody here seemed to be interested in what was going on in the Gobi.

She went to the duty-free shop, which they had arranged as their meeting point.

"As soon as the passengers leave the building and go to the plane, we'll get going," Sid said. "Once we're on board, the stewardesses will think our passes have already been checked."

"What about the seats? The flight personnel have lists..."

"We have to take that risk. If they check us, we'll be found out. Then the plane will turn around so we can be picked up by the police. But by that time we'll no longer be in the cabin."

"Do me a favor, Sid? Give me the pistol!"

"Only if I get it back after we reach America. Promise me!"

"I promise."

In a dark corner of the sanitary facilities, the weapon changed hands. Sid teleported with Sue onto the runway. When the passengers began boarding, he took her hand again.

They had a wonderful view of a hilltop. Sue was sitting on a rock, her hand lying on Sid's arm. The boy's skin was no longer such a dark red, and the wrinkles on his face had become less pronounced.

Sid talked like a waterfall, speaking feverishly about his past, as if his life would be at risk if he didn't tell her everything. He told her that, as a kid living on the streets with no parents, he had not understood the world because nobody had explained it to him. He spoke about the others of the same age that he used to rob people with. They broke into houses and cellars, where they mostly ate as much as they could because they were driven by hunger. Once they had been discovered, and that was when Sid learned he could move short distances, disappearing from one place to another. When he did it several times, he became tired and exhausted and the strange powers went away temporarily.

He and his friend had been caught. Then a man had appeared and said he was interested in Sid's abilities. He had bought Sid out of detention and taken him with him.

That was how he ended up at Camp Specter, the US mutant school in the north of Mexico—and how he had come to Dr. Goratschin, who had tried to torture him and the others. At some point he'd come up with a plan to escape. Goratschin and Monterny had thwarted that, and all hell had broken loose at Camp Specter. Already dying, Goratschin had set the camp on fire using only his mind. The mutants had run around in chaos, and Sid had used the rising panic all around him to make his escape.

Until that point in his life, he had only experienced bad things, so he had cut himself off from people.

Sid suddenly stopped talking and looked searchingly in all directions. "He's close. We have to get out of here!"

Sue sensed that he only felt he was being followed. Nevertheless, she did not try to talk him out of it. "Take us to the airport," was all she said.

The plane from Schiphol to New York would not take off for another four hours, but they could disappear into the hustle and bustle of the departure lounges.

When they felt the hot asphalt of New York beneath their soles after the ten-hour flight and successfully avoiding customs, Sid's skin was almost back to normal.

"I have you to thank for that," he said. "Having you close makes me healthy."

"I think it has to do with teleporting," Sue said. "What now?"

"We go by train. There's a small railway station not far from Fort Sunrise. Ehm, Sue, could you give me back the pistol please?"

"Promise me you won't risk innocent lives."

"I promise."

15.

July 15, 2036,
Thora

Twenty-four hours... It felt like eternity, even on a planet like this. More than enough to track down two men—three, actually—and set one of them free.

Why had the deadline passed, yet nothing had happened? Thora doubted the humans even wanted to let Crest go. He was an alien to them, and everything alien was seen negatively from the outset. Many less-developed species reacted that way. They had zero understanding of what life really meant.

"Do you remember your childhood, Rico?"

He looked at her with big eyes. Did she detect surprise in his expression, or perhaps even incomprehension? Before Thora could think about what this strange look meant, it was gone again. Rico gestured, indicating he could not remember.

"I can remember mine." Thora continued talking, because it felt good to do so. "I had taken a valuable positronic component from its place. I hid it and didn't want to give it back."

Rico looked at her, a peculiar look in his eyes, as if he was having some effort following what she was saying.

"I refused," Thora said. "The adults hit me on the fingers for that. It was very painful."

"And you didn't give back the positronic component," Rico guessed after a pause during which Thora remained silent.

"Yes, I did," she said hesitantly. "But I held out for a long time."

"How old were you?"

"Three, perhaps four."

"So you were old enough to realize that you couldn't have done anything with the component anyway. Why didn't you give it back right away?"

Thora looked at the screens. The *Tosoma IX* was flying at high altitude. It was not that far from the spot where Crest had first

arrived on the planet. The ship approached the Indian subcontinent from the ocean. She pointed.

"Are there special buildings down there?"

What Thora saw looked very impressive to her and yet by no means imposing. With two fingers, she pointed at the image of the filigree, multistory domed building with its side turrets, towers, and the large waterscape leading up to it.

"I would advise you not to," Rico replied, albeit reluctantly. "Do you really want to take this wonderful building and—"

"If I have interpreted the data correctly, it's called the Taj Mahal. And the humans call it 'world cultural heritage.' Do they even know what culture is?"

Rico swallowed, a lump forming in his throat: "The humans have an even more illustrious name for this building. They call it 'a teardrop on the cheek of time.'"

"Is that supposed to impress me?" Thora asked. "The deadline has passed and nobody has brought Crest to me. There are no reliable signs of life from him. The natives of this planet have made their decision."

She activated one of the guns. The projectors flooded with energy fast. The last shot she had fired, which was in Washington, hadn't reached its loading point as fast. Thora did not believe she was mistaken. Perhaps the craft had simply been lying dormant for too long.

"The building is a mausoleum," Rico said hastily. "A Grand Mogul had it built in memory of his chief wife after her death. It must be about four hundred years old."

"The humans let the deadline pass without meeting my demands," Thora reminded him. "They deserve nothing better."

"Do you really wish to disturb the peace of the dead? There are better targets for demonstrating your strength."

Thora lifted her gaze from the screens. "Why, Rico?" she asked, surprised.

She allowed her companion no time to answer. A dazzling thermo-beam flashed out of the transmission field and shot through the air, very close to the domed building. The bundled energy hit the long water basin, fanned out, and covered the access area with bubbling embers.

The slim trees on both sides of the basin were transformed into burning torches. The deafening energy path went out before it

could endanger the people who were fleeing in panic. Left behind were charred trees, their branches stretching accusingly towards the sky; still-glowing embers lay on the pathways, and there was thick smoke everywhere, pushed downwards by the wind, yet the beauty of the main building remained undisturbed.

"I hope I won't come to regret this," Thora thought out loud. Her voice was devoid of emotion.

She looked over at the screen on her control panel, which showed the outlines of all the continents. For a second, she was undecided, but then she stretched out her hand, and her finger poked into the heart of the state of France.

"Paris, I remember. Crest talked about it when he began to collect data about this planet. The tower in Paris also belongs to this cultural heritage you talked about. I hope they have less to complain about in this case."

Thora didn't care that Rico did not answer. She noticed that he had plugged into Earth's communications network. While the *Tosoma IX* climbed into the sky, which was now covered by a thin layer of clouds, and accelerated westwards, Rico spoke to an official administrative office in Paris. He was demanding that the tower itself and a wide area surrounding it be evacuated immediately.

Rico did not want to sacrifice lives. And neither did Thora. However, if she found herself being confronted by Crest's death, that situation would change dramatically.

Thora was not worried about flying the craft. She could feel the energy flows of the guns for a short while after, but there was no noticeable resistance. The craft seemed to be tougher than she had originally thought. It was a ship designed to fight in a war, not a research vessel like the *Aetron* and its auxiliary craft had been.

Rico slowed down the flight. "The impact of the destruction on the humans will become stronger if each of the individual happenings is given more time in between," he commented, answering Thora's question about the why.

She could not argue with that. She studied the radio logbook and tested the positronics, although she admitted she was actually looking for further positive developments on the ship. She discovered the coded impulse more by chance. It was not in the logs, nor was it noted in the transmission routines. It was an extremely weak hyper impulse, but it left the antennae in an endless loop. An impulse that did not contain any information, only

a modulation—and that was what was particularly unusual.

"It looks like a shift in the positronic default configuration." Thora turned to Rico once she was sure that it was not a mistaken measurement.

There were tears in Rico's eyes, a sign that he was very agitated.

"What's wrong with you?" Thora asked. It was very quiet all of a sudden. "We are dealing with a low stage of development here; don't forget that."

"You can't understand," he answered, his voice sounding almost defiant.

"Just don't think about it!"

"Not thinking is impossible. I can't turn off my thoughts just like that."

"There's no such thing as impossible," Thora contradicted him. "I get the impression you don't want to stop thinking about it. Why?"

"Later... Later, when... I'm going to lie down. The aftereffects of my deep sleep are really getting to me."

She stared at him in disbelief. Rico walked all the way across the control center to the exit. His pace was anything but slow. It looked to Thora as if he were fleeing from something, but she couldn't tell what, which made her very uncomfortable.

The ship was now flying across Europe. Paris came into view. The expansive metropolis bathed in the twilight of dusk was definitely Paris, as a comparison between its optical features and the now available digital maps clearly showed.

Thora flew slowly above the city to give people time to leave the danger zone. Then fighter planes appeared. She had not seen them coming, and the ship's tracking system had not set off any alarms.

Several rockets exploded against the protective shield. But they were not a threat. The Arkonide stared grimly at the second wave of attacks heading in her direction. She could have wiped out the entire formation by firing only once. But she didn't do it, without pondering why.

She fired at the Eiffel Tower using two of her thermal guns. The shots hit the tip of the tower and wandered down its sides. Glowing almost red, the tower remained standing for a few seconds in the darkening evening sky before the first struts gave way.

The narrower upper part slowly tipped to the side. Molten metal was spraying in all directions as the struts were no longer able to stand up to the attack and began to collapse. The damaged segments broke away with a thunderous roar and fell in on themselves. A wall of flame shot upwards, but there was little in the vicinity for it to feed on, and it quickly died down, leaving only a few glowing embers.

One of the four legs of the tower gave way, and the rest of the construction tipped to the side.

A strange sound hung in the air. It seemed to come from all directions, with high, almost shrill tones mingled with hollow booming ones. Thora recognized the ringing of bells. More and more bells joined in. It was like a scream, a long wailing outcry by the city.

16.

July 15, 2036,
The hideout at Fort Sunrise

"I know that you're tired." Clifford Monterny smiled, but it was a smile that was anything but calming. "Don't you see, Crest, that you're just making things more difficult for yourself? Give me the information I seek, and you can have everything you want from me. Please!"

Crest da Zoltral could hardly keep his eyes open anymore. His head kept flopping forward, but each time it happened, he woke again and managed to pull himself together. He stared unwaveringly at Monterny.

"You're not feeling very well. I can see that, Crest, so you might as well admit it."

"I'm feeling fine," the white-haired Arkonide contradicted him sluggishly.

His contorted features told another story. He had not stood up from the hard and uncomfortable chair for hours. The room had been darkened, and it was impossible to tell whether the sun was shining outside or whether it was the middle of the night.

"Where are we?" he asked in a labored voice.

"Fort Sunrise is an isolated place," Deegan interjected. The telekinetic kept himself in the background. "Nobody will hear you screaming once I start—"

"Stay out of it, Roster!" Monterny interrupted. "Our guest knows only too well what's good for him. Isn't that so, Crest?"

The old man murmured something in a language that nobody understood. It was no doubt Arkonide, his native tongue. Monterny threw Tatiana Michalovna a questioning look. The telepath was standing diagonally to the back of the Arkonide. She shook her head.

"I'll make you a proposal." Monterny went around the table on which a bright lamp was standing, the only source of light in the

room. When he was next to Crest, he leaned on the edge of the table. “You tell me everything about the Planet of Eternal Life, and then we can go our separate ways in peace.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“As you wish, Crest. Just as you wish.”

Monterny began wandering restlessly around the room. He stopped several times and looked at the Arkonide. Crest was exhausted and his strength was waning. His chin rested on his chest. A second later, his upper body was hit by a heavy punch, and he was suddenly sitting bolt upright. Deegan had a wide grin on his face. He punched the old man telekinetically again and again, before the latter fell asleep again.

“I just can’t get deep enough into his consciousness,” Tatiana whispered when Monterny came over to her side. “You’ll have to allow him some rest. His need for sleep is overpowering, and it is pushing out everything else.”

There were five of them in the room, which wasn’t particularly large. Monterny, Tatiana, Deegan, and the Japanese teleporter, Tako Kakuta, a child from the Fukushima Prefecture. And Crest, of course.

The Arkonide made a move to stand up from the chair. He grabbed the edge of the table and was already half upright when Deegan pushed him back down telekinetically. Crest swayed and almost fell over. The only thing stopping him from tumbling to the floor was Kakuta, who teleported over to him at top speed.

“As you can see, Crest, we only want the best for you,” Monterny said. “Just tell me something about this Planet of Eternal Life!”

The Arkonide remained silent.

“He’s sleeping with his eyes open,” the telepath said.

That was the moment Deegan grabbed the old man by the shoulders and turned him violently towards him, punching him in the face.

“Wake up, old man. And if you don’t want me to break your bones, then spit out what we want to hear. We know you’re looking for the Planet of Eternal Life, and we want to be a part of it. So say something!”

He punched him again, and Crest slumped down with a gurgling sound.

“Roster!” Monterny was almost screaming. “You’re not

supposed to kill him. He's no use to us dead."

"We won't get anything out of him otherwise. Decide what you want, Clifford. Your soft touch or the hard way..."

A short but clear signal to Kakuta was enough, and the Japanese man teleported and materialized next to Deegan. He grabbed the telekinetic by the arm, and the two of them disappeared.

Crest was lying on the floor, gasping for air. Monterny helped the old man up and sat him on the chair again.

"You can have some time to take a nap, Crest. One hour. After that, I want to hear everything from you!"

"If you attack him like that one more time, Roster..."

"What then? Tatiana can't get anywhere near him, she said so herself. And he's able to resist your powers. So we'll do things my way."

"I don't want you treating Crest like that! Have I expressed myself clearly enough?"

"But you're waiting to find out what he knows? Yes? How long are you willing to wait? Until our doctors have built half of a spare parts warehouse into you?"

"What I think is that you can't wait, Roster. You're a fool, and you don't even realize it. We won't get anything out of Crest using violence. I'm warning you, Roster, don't attack him in that way ever again."

"Open your eyes, Crest! Take a close look and tell me exactly what's happening there!"

An hour had passed. The Arkonide had slept like the dead, his head hanging forwards on his arms, which lay folded on the table. He was obviously having trouble finding his way back to reality.

Blinking, the Arkonide looked at the tablet Monterny was holding up to his face. "What's that?" he asked hesitantly.

"Thora has declared war on the Earth!" Monterny said in a sharp tone of voice. "She's attacking."

"Thora is not interested in humans. Why should she do that? I don't see any reason for it."

"You're the reason, Crest! The Eiffel Tower in Paris—destroyed. And in India. Ancient cultural heritage sites wiped out by Thora at the press of a button. An entire island destroyed in the North Sea.

And that seems to be only the beginning. The woman is crazy, and she will destroy the entire planet. You're the only one who can prevent it."

Crest shrugged his shoulders weakly. "Thora does nothing without a reason. I can't imagine that—"

"Thora is demanding that you be set free."

"Then do it, Mr. Monterny. Where's the problem?"

"You are free, Crest, as soon as you share your knowledge with us."

Crest pushed the tablet aside, placed his elbows on the table, and massaged his face with both hands.

"Then your world will burn, Mr. Monterny. I can say nothing else, except that Thora is extremely stubborn."

"We can't let it happen, Clifford!" Tatiana Michalovna whispered to Monterny. "He's right, Thora is unpredictable. I was able to get close to her thoughts in Washington. She considers humans to be barbarians. She doesn't care whether we exist or not. She will incinerate the Earth."

"Let her try!" Monterny shrugged his shoulders. "It won't be easy for her." He glanced at Crest. The Arkonide had fallen asleep again. "I'm convinced you can read his thoughts. You managed to do it passably once, you'll manage it again."

"He's resisting, as if he knows..."

Monterny interrupted the telepath with a sudden movement of his hand. "Crest is on the brink of an emotional breakdown, and he'll no longer be able to conceal his thoughts. But what use is knowledge of another alien planet? We also need a spaceship that can bring us to the Planet of Eternal Life."

"Where are we supposed to get that?" Deegan asked. "NASA's only just managed to reach the Moon."

"From Thora!" Monterny said.

Michalovna shook her head violently. "That's impossible. Wishful thinking. Not even the superpowers can effectively attack her. We have nothing against their technology."

"You don't have to be a superpower." Monterny looked at Crest thoughtfully. "Look at him! Did his technology help him?" He looked at the Arkonide. "Wake him up, Roster! But be careful, Crest is our life insurance."

When the Arkonide jerked awake, Monterny turned back to the telepath.

“You’ll manage it—and we’ll manage it too. We are many, Tatiana, don’t forget that. And, more than anything else, we have a weapon that the Arkonides can do nothing against.”

He demonstratively tapped his forehead. “Our minds are a weapon that no technology can withstand.”

17.

Meeting at Fort Sunrise

Thora looked at the screen without saying a word. Her hands were shaking. She balled up her fists, and her breath came in short, hard bursts. The veins on her temples were swelling.

“What have these humans done to him?” she hissed furiously. “I’ve never seen Crest suffer like that before. He’s in a terrible state.”

The radio monitor had only just received the communication—a short combination of sound and image. Crest was chalk-white. The veins were showing in his injured face, his eyes were deep in their sockets, listless, their expression one of hopelessness. He had given up on life.

“They’re going to pay for this!” Thora stared at the images looking for details that she had missed at first. “Do we have a location?”

“A mountain range in the northeast of New York State,” Rico answered.

A mountain landscape with a cloudy sky could be seen in the background of the picture. A wooded area, not so dense, and a river. Thora interpreted the outlines of the shadows, guessing that what she saw was probably a large gorge or part of a valley.

There were several large buildings, mainly built from thick tree trunks. They were standing close together, looked to be fortified, and provided space for several hundred people. A military camp was Thora’s first impression, but she could not see any typical military vehicles.

Crest was tied to a roughly chopped wooden post. His arms were pulled back and held tightly by chains, and there was another chain around his neck, making it almost impossible for him to move.

“Come and get him, if you can!”

That could only be the voice of Clifford Monterny. It sounded

over and over again, as if trapped in an endless loop.

Come and get him, if you can!

His voice was filled with absolute derision. It was not difficult to identify such nuances of tone when one had spent a little time studying these barbarians.

"Yes, I can!" Thora said. It not only sounded like a promise, it was one.

"The bearings for the transmitter have come in," Rico announced only a second later.

The *Tosoma IX* was far to the north of Europe, flying directly towards several abandoned oil platforms, when the transmission had been received. As big as the *Aetron* had been, the rusty giants stood defiant against the stormy sea. A single supply ship fought against the high waves.

Thora had nothing more than a thoughtful glance at the platforms as they disappeared extremely fast below the ship when she changed course. Here, close to the North Pole, the planet was just as rough and rugged as its inhabitants.

The atmosphere became thinner. Electromagnetic discharges, caused by the interplay between the upper atmosphere and solar wind, covered the sky with a restless play of colors. Accelerating all the time, the ship was immersed in this sea of blue and red swathes that swirled around one another like stellar birds caught up in a mating ritual.

Even though she felt it went against her better judgment, Thora had to admit that the planet had many beautiful sides. A world that was perhaps even ideal to be colonized by Arkon, if not for the life she had brought upon herself.

A wall of interspersed red and blue emerged in front of the ship, and then the northern lights faded away. The *Tosoma IX* glided above the sparse glacial regions of Greenland. Large areas of the island shimmered in a luscious green alongside the surging yellow of the fields.

Rico started to decelerate, flying over the Labrador towards the north of the United States.

"It's a trap!" he announced.

"I know," Thora said. "But I can't give up on Crest." She checked her battledress, pulled the transparent helmet forward, and closed it. "Do you understand me, Rico?"

He looked up only briefly. “Radio connection and exterior acoustics are working perfectly.”

“I don’t have a weapon. Give me your raygun!”

He hesitated. “He who carries the sword shall die by the sword,” he said quietly. “It’s an old saying of the humans.”

Thora opened her helmet again. She studied her companion thoughtfully. “How do you know that, Rico? Don’t you always say you get all your information from the radio probes?”

The expansive stretch of a mountain range could now be seen below the ship. With lakes, forests, and every now and again the thin ribbon of a road.

“No interceptors?”

“The humans are capable of learning,” Rico answered. “They realize they can achieve nothing by hunting a prey that is faster and more agile than they are.”

“Do you think they’ve really learned that lesson? It has more to do with our demonstration of our strengths.”

Minutes later the sixty-meter sphereship was several kilometers above its destination. A forested valley, a field with several tributaries and bends and fertile alluvial deposits; and then the buildings, standing in almost square formations. And people working, spread out far from one another. The first of them had noticed the ship, which was descending slowly. Many fled into their houses.

“The large concrete surface with the symbols painted on it is the landing spot for helicopters,” Rico noted.

In the middle of the otherwise empty area was Crest, standing chained to a pole. His head was drooping forward. Thora could not even see in the optical close-up whether her mentor had lost consciousness or was perhaps already dead.

Monterny was standing next to Crest. He was holding onto the wooden post and looking up in the direction of the auxiliary craft. He was wearing an Arkonide battledress, perhaps even the one that belonged to Crest.

A short distance away, the second kidnapper was waiting. It had to be him, because he was also wearing a battledress. Thora could not guess who the third man was. He didn’t look to be very tall, had a slight build, short black hair, and very pronounced cheekbones. The people on this planet had clear differences in their

physiognomy, something that was unusual.

"Altitude five hundred meters, no indication of heavy weaponry below us."

"Maintain altitude!" Thora said. She switched on the radio set in her suit. "Can you hear me, Monterny?"

"Loud and clear." This was followed by a derisive laugh. "Do you intend to stay up there and wait, Thora? You can have Crest; he's standing beside me, and he's doing fine. But you'll have to fetch him yourself. Or is that too much for you to cope with? Are you scared, Thora?"

"I..." She bit her lip. Every word was one too many. Monterny wanted to provoke her. She turned to Rico. "I'm going down and coming back with Crest. Give me your raygun now!"

"No!" the leader of the Venus station said in defiance. "I regret that I won't be doing that, Thora. This trap is too obvious..."

"Of course it is. But I'm not afraid of a handful of barbarians."

Rico ignored her outstretched hand demanding the gun. "Monterny knows nothing of my existence," he said. "We should trick him."

What Perry Rhodan had referred to as "a stone's throw away" was around eight hundred kilometers as the crow flies. A small distance for the *Phoenix* and one the ship could cover fast. The real problem was Thora.

Aliens bomb the Taj Mahal.

The Eiffel Tower melted! Tears and debris on the Champ de Mars.

The island of Heligoland under water. The extraterrestrial's warning saved the inhabitants, but where will they strike next?

Invasion from the Moon—the Arkonides have shown their true colors. The first vigilante groups are forming in the large cities...

The news tickers were outdoing one another in their usual thirst for sensation. It was impossible to tell at first glance what was true and what was pure fantasy.

"Thora doesn't even realize what she's doing," Reginald Bull complained, "She's doing herself the worst favor of all by carrying out such attacks. I would like to know if she's thought about the consequences for a single second."

"Ask her!" Rhodan said to his friend.

Bull gave him a sideways look and nodded. "I'm going to do just that."

It didn't sound as if he really meant it.

Interceptors roared across the American skies again and again. President Drummond and the Pentagon were flexing their muscles. However, it was not much more than a show to trick the public into a false sense of security. Rhodan and Bull were already forced to keep their fast-flying machine low to the ground to make sure they escaped detection by the radar systems. The same applied for the densely populated area up to about Scranton. A spider-legged craft —which looked like something between a lunar landing module from the last century and a monstrous alien robot—could set off a wave of panic in no time.

It was not until they were farther north near the foothills of the Adirondacks that things became easier. Rhodan, who was flying now, increased their speed despite the difficult terrain. They reached the valley, which opened up westwards at an altitude of about a thousand meters, without any further incidents getting in their way.

"So this is where Monterny gets up to no good," Bull commented. "An otherwise idyllic spot."

There was thick vegetation growing on both sides of the river. Rhodan pulled the *Phoenix* in close to it, using its natural protection from visibility. "If we hide the craft and proceed on foot..."

He didn't get much further, stopped in the middle of what he was saying by Bull's elbow digging sharply into his ribs. With the other arm, his friend pointed towards the sky.

Roughly three to four kilometers away and several hundred meters above the ground, there was a silver sphere hanging in the sky.

"Thora!" Rhodan exclaimed.

"She tracked down Monterny and his gang faster than we did. But I don't think..."

"What?" Rhodan asked, when his friend stopped mid-sentence.

"There's no way Monterny will give Crest up voluntarily. And he doesn't care whether Thora destroys a few monuments."

"You mean he's using Crest as bait?"

Bull wiped the back of his hand across his lips. "That's exactly what I'm saying," he confirmed. "Monterny wants the ship."

"He doesn't know how to fly it."

"He's hoping his mutants will be able to help him with that."

Rhodan set the *Phoenix* down. The river turned around another

bend at this point, and having bushes and trees on three sides reduced the risk of them being accidentally discovered.

"If Thora agrees to negotiate with Monterny, that puts her in an extremely dangerous position. I'm afraid each of them is looking to put the other one over a barrel."

"'Just have a look around'... That's what you said, right?" Bull remarked. "What exactly did you mean by that?"

Perry Rhodan left the question unanswered. The spaceship remained in its unchanged position above the valley. A tiny point left the sphere and floated slowly downwards.

The two astronauts exchanged a brief look with one another, then set off quickly. They were soon able to see Fort Sunrise in its entirety. Crest, Monterny, and two other men were only a stone's throw from where they were hiding.

"One of them must be Deegan. It was him who killed Flipper," Rhodan whispered

"The other one is almost definitely a mutant as well," said Bull. "My guess is that he's a teleporter."

Thora had already reached the ground.

As soon as the Arkonide left the sphereship, Monterny knew he had more or less won the fight, despite the fact that Thora was wearing a battledress. That was exactly what he had expected—in fact, it was to his advantage. Because wearing it would make the Arkonide feel safer than if she were wearing something simpler.

And Thora already knew that he and Roster were in battledress as well. She had probably guessed that he had Crest's raygun in his possession too.

Her battledress did not look any different to what he was wearing. An energy weapon was stuck into her belt in plain view. That was a demonstration of power, but it did not impress Monterny in the least. The aliens had to prove they were better and stronger. After all, they came from the stars, while the people of Earth had only managed to send manned flights as far as the Moon while shooting a great number of probes towards their neighboring planets and across the solar system. Without their clearly expressed arrogance and sense of superiority, the Arkonides would soon lose their aloofness.

You'll be surprised how fast that might happen, Monterny thought.

As long as he had Crest, Thora would not dare shoot at him,

scared that the white-haired old man might be injured or even die in the crossfire. Her threat to incinerate the world if Crest was not handed over to her already said enough about her in this respect.

Thora landed at the edge of the field, twenty meters from where he was standing.

"Untie Crest!" she demanded. Her voice sounded a little hoarse.

"Why the hurry, Thora?"

"What do you want from me, human?" she answered over the radio.

He folded his arms. Since the Arkonide woman kept her helmet on, Monterny assumed she was taking measurements and looking at the results on her head-up display.

"I don't have a concealed army here that you should worry about," he said.

"I know, I just ascertained that myself."

After everything that Monterny knew about Thora, he did not expect such an honest remark from her.

"I want to talk to you, Thora. Not only at an impersonal distance but from human to Arkonide."

"I don't believe we have anything in common."

"Crest, for example. And, of course, the Planet of Eternal Life."

"Where..." Thora stopped herself immediately from speaking further. But she did walk closer to him. The helmet reflected slightly, and the refracted light blurred her features. All that was clearly visible was her long white hair.

"Let Crest go, human! Otherwise I will return to my ship and—"

"I don't believe you will. Crest is still intact."

"Are you threatening me?"

Monterny looked at the woman, his eyes strained. Her helmet was annoying him. It felt like a wall between him and the Arkonide that interfered with his powers. On the other hand, his abilities had not had the desired effect on Crest. What was more, Crest was proving very difficult to spy on telepathically, and he showed no reaction whatsoever to Monterny's powers of suggestion.

"We should reach an agreement, Thora. But let's be clear from the outset about the most important thing: we're on the same side."

He was stalling. It was a new attempt to put a spell on the woman. After sustaining serious head injuries, he had developed special powers that had gained him loyal friends, only a few of which had managed to get away from him. One of them was Sid

González. He had especially encouraged the chubby young Latino in his development, and that was precisely his mistake—the biggest mistake he had ever made in his life.

Sid was to blame for the death of his friend Ivanovich Goratschin, the driving force behind the "brain drain" project. Sid's escape from Camp Specter should never have been allowed to happen. Elmer Bradley had also been a very talented mutant; his strong telepathic powers had developed in such a way that he was able to penetrate matter. Elmer had also died, just like Ivanovich.

Monterny focused on his mental coercion of the Arkonide woman. Thora was only three steps away from him.

You are among friends! The words reverberated in Monterny's head. *Give me your raygun. You have nothing to fear. Give it to me!*

She did not react. It was if he had come up against a resistance he was unable to overcome, as if the suggestive force was flowing back in his own direction. Monterny suddenly realized that he was reaching for his own weapon.

He felt extremely hot. Did he really intend to give his raygun to the Arkonide?

Thora reached for her helmet, loosened the lock, and pushed the transparent film, which had become floppy, to the back of her neck. Her facial features were not those of a woman.

"You wanted to trick me?" Monterny croaked.

He knew it. The aliens could not be trusted. He took a quick step to the side, placing himself behind Crest, grabbing the chain that was around the Arkonide's neck. His opponent, however, was a tick faster.

Monterny was unable to dodge what was coming. A heavy punch to the shoulder made him tumble, while a second one brought him to the ground. He only just managed to catch himself and roll to the side.

"Tako!" he yelled and saw the teleporter disappear. But his opponent was already on top of him, dragging him up from the ground.

18.

Death at Fort Sunrise

Roster Deegan could tangibly feel the tension that suddenly hung in the air. Clifford was prepared. He always had everything under control.

Deegan pulled the half-eaten energy bar out of his pocket and shoved it into his mouth. He grinned. Kris Kringle had come early this year. And Thora had brought her small spaceship as a present.

Small? That was, of course, relative. Deegan looked back and forth between Monterny and the Arkonide woman as Thora reached for her helmet and opened it.

He swallowed the half-chewed bar. For a moment, he felt like it might get stuck in his throat. Something was not quite right. He switched on his protective field. “Save energy,” Monterny had warned him. “At full charge, there’s less than half an hour available.”

Deegan didn’t care. He had been distracted for a moment, When he looked up again, Thora was already attacking Clifford. He heard Monterny shout, “Tako!” and the teleporter disappeared to arrange for Goratschin to be woken up.

Then the sphereship will be ours.

Deegan watched as the Arkonide woman grabbed Monterny and pulled him up as if he weighed no more than a few kilograms. In his head, Deegan grabbed Thora’s hands and bent her fingers open. Then he punched her hard with his invisible fist. His entire body cramped and he forgot to breathe with the effort, but Thora tumbled backwards.

Deegan came in with more force. He imagined himself attacking the Arkonide like a kickboxer. A right-left combination to the shoulder, a hard kick to the shins. Her battledress absorbed most of the force, but she still fell.

“That’s not Thora!”

The words came from Monterny, who was now back on his feet

again.

Not...Thora? Roster was distracted for a second. His opponent used that second to activate the protective shield on his battledress. Before the shield reached full capacity, Deegan attacked again, concentrating on the technology. He had to rob the Arkonide of his protection and force him to the ground...

He noticed too late that the Arkonide had drawn his weapon. But so what? Deegan was just as well protected. He grabbed his opponent's hand with the weapon in it. In his mind, he saw himself pull at the raygun, saw the weapon turn around and aim back at the Arkonide himself, and he saw the look of shock in the alien's eyes.

All of a sudden, there were burning-hot embers everywhere. Deegan only laughed at this. The heat was not a threat to him. He grabbed the Arkonide even tighter, grappled inside his opponent's suit, mentally pushed his hand into the other man's body, and felt for his organs. He pulled and ripped at the flesh, and his thoughts brimmed over with the notion that he was bringing death to the Arkonide.

The opposite was true. The heat was becoming unbearable, tearing through his body and taking his breath away. His scream stuck in his throat.

He was no longer conscious of the fact that he had collapsed.

"We have to help her!" Rhodan urged his friend. "Thora doesn't have a clue what she's in for."

He wanted to rush out of their hiding place, but Bull held him back.

"Thora won't allow herself to be helped. And armed with nothing but an electric stun gun..." He fell silent.

Thora was attacking Monterny, and the mutant called something back that sounded like her name. She hit him with full force. But all of a sudden, fully unexpected, she tumbled backwards.

"Deegan's involved as well," Rhodan realized. "The telekinetic is too strong for Thora."

"We can't get close enough to him, Perry. Forget the idea. She has to fight this battle alone."

The Arkonide woman jerked in reaction to the heavy punches. The invisible attacks pushed her to and fro. As she bent forward, her protective shield finally activated, if only as a weak shimmer.

"Now she knows what to expect here," Bull commented dryly.

A shot from a raygun sped towards Deegan. His suit's protective energy field flashed once—and then died down. The shot penetrated the mutant's torso, and Deegan dropped to the ground.

Thora fell at almost the same moment, flat on the ground, the raygun tumbling from her hand and sliding across the concrete surface before landing several meters away.

Rhodan jumped up and started running with Bull hard on his heels. The telekinetic was dead, there was no doubt about that. Monterny was watching the two of them, but Rhodan paid him little attention. He also ignored the fact that he could hardly defend himself with a simple electric stun gun.

The distance was less than a hundred meters. He knelt down next to Thora, who was lying with her hands crumpled below her body, her face turned to the ground. He carefully turned her over while Bull grabbed the raygun.

Rhodan looked at the distorted face below him. It was an Arkonide—obvious from the red eyes and long white hair. But Rhodan had never seen the man before. In fact, he doubted whether the man had been part of the crew of the *Aetron*.

"Who are you?"

The red eyes were veiled by a layer of moisture. And yet they still seemed to focus on Rhodan.

"R... Rico," the man groaned.

His hands came up and grasped at his throat, as if he were unable to breathe properly. Rhodan helped him to open his suit and froze. The alien's body was torn open, cruelly destroyed by Deegan's telekinetic powers. But there was no blood, no bone. Instead, plastic, steel components and mechanical parts filled the body cavity. The man was a robot!

He was completely different from the Arkonide robots Rhodan had seen to date. If not for the terrible gaping wound, the astronaut would have been unable to tell the difference between this android and a real Arkonide.

"Where do you come from?" Rhodan asked.

"It's not important." The voice was becoming hoarse. "Must go to him..."

Rhodan thought he could see a growing sense of horror in the eyes of the dying man—robot. Rico wanted to say something but did not succeed.

"D... Dome," he finally managed.

“What dome?”

The robot was gripped by a shudder that ran through his entire body...yet another thing that made him exactly like a person of flesh and blood. Then he died.

Bright embers flowed out of the body. Rico’s energy stores had obviously been damaged or overloaded. The embers were eating him up from the inside out, attacking the shell of his body and causing him to fall apart.

Rhodan recoiled. Only then did he realize that Monterny was staring at him with a mocking grin on his face. But the grin soon turned into a grimace as sparks appeared in the air very close to Rhodan, and two people appeared out of nowhere.

Tatiana Michalovna looked up only briefly as Kakuta materialized. He did not have to say anything; she knew from reading his thoughts that the time had come. Monterny had already given the relevant instructions.

“Clifford needs you,” she murmured, looking pensively at the giant figure on the stretcher.

The man was two meters tall, his damp hair sticking to his head. He had already been restless for hours without waking up.

Tatiana opened a cool box and took a labeled vial out of it. Without hesitating, she pressed the syringe and pushed out the air plus a couple of drops of the opaque liquid in the cannula. Haggard and Manoli had recommended the medicine.

She injected him with a strong thrust of the needle, then threw everything into the trash can. As a telepath, she was aware of the first stirrings of consciousness as he began to wake up. Clifford Monterny had used his full power of suggestion to prepare Ivan Goratschin for a case such as this. The soldier Goratschin had been at war in Afghanistan when an injury had put him into a coma. He had been in defense mode, ready to hit back against the enemy with all his might...

The room in which the sickbed and the necessary equipment were held was reminiscent of an observatory. As soon as the high dome was opened, the view of the sky was free. Tatiana activated the sensor switch on the motors that operated the dome. A low scraping noise could be heard as the hydraulics sprang into action. A small gap appeared at the top of the dome and became wider to provide an unhindered view of the deep blue sky interspersed with

clouds that resembled bunches of cotton.

A steel sphere glinted in the sunlight—the Arkonide spaceship. It felt to Tatiana as if she only had to reach out her hand to grasp it. However, the ship, which was surrounded by the bright aura of a protective shield, was actually several hundred meters above her.

Ivan Goratschin awoke from his coma. Tatiana could tell from reading his thoughts that he knew what he had to do.

He concentrated his mind on the sphere...

Roster Deegan had died as he had lived: impulsively, aggressively, and recklessly. As a telekinetic, he had felt himself to be superior to everyone around him. Monterny had known that one day Deegan would go too far with his complacency. Nevertheless, it pained him to lose the man now.

He looked over to Rhodan and Bull. They were the last people he had expected to see. Rhodan knelt down next to the Arkonide and turned him on his back. The man was dead, of that Monterny was certain.

The shimmer of embers could still be seen through the open battledress. Monterny looked more closely, but he did not fully understand what had happened until Rhodan recoiled. A robot. It had to be. Thora had sent a machine to get Crest. She had known it was a trap.

The air between them flickered. Suddenly, there were sparks everywhere, and two figures materialized. Monterny knew one of the two figures only too well.

"Sid!" he hissed. "Have you come back to me?"

He saw that the boy had lost weight, and the girl who was with him seemed to be extremely fragile, with a stump at the end of one arm where a hand should have been.

It was awful. How many children with similar deformities had he seen? Children with no arms, no legs. There weren't enough places helping these poor, pitiful creatures. Somebody had to look after them, the weak who couldn't help themselves. Where might Sid have found this girl?

She looked at Monterny with interest, her eyes showing uncertainty and fear. Maybe she would stay at Fort Sunrise. As Sid had brought her with him, she must possess special mental powers. Sid had always been someone special for Monterny. An unusually talented boy. And they had been very close until Sid had fled one

day with another child from Camp Specter. And while fleeing, they had killed his old friend, Ivanhoe—Ivanovich Goratschin. The man who had saved his life, who had made him realize what a gift his dream actually was.

Ivanhoe was dead, and Sid was to blame. Sid, who was now standing right in front of him. He had a weapon in his hand, his index finger on the trigger. Monterny recognized it as a Chinese army pistol.

He stiffened, regaining his composure. “How are you, Sid?” he asked. “I was worried about you, son. You look gaunt.” The boy had become extremely thin.

Drop the weapon and come to me! Please!

Sid blinked, irritated. He shook his head as if trying to get rid of an annoying insect. Monterny increased the suggestive pressure, and Sid lowered his head, his forehead directed at Monterny like a bull about to attack.

“I’m fine,” he answered. “And nothing you do can change that, Clifford.”

Monterny tried again. *Come to me, son! Please! Put the weapon down!*

Sid held the pistol in his right hand. He nervously wiped his forehead with his left hand.

“I’m glad,” Monterny said. His mind was racing. Rhodan and Bull were there, but they were certainly not the main danger facing him. Sid was the bigger risk, especially as long as he was holding a weapon. But the greatest danger of all was floating above him. Thora had sent a robot, meaning she was still in the spaceship.

Time was running out. He needed Crest and the ship to help him attain eternal life. If he had Thora and the ship, he could sacrifice Crest.

Monterny ignored the weapon aimed in his direction. “Listen to me, Sid.” He lifted his hands to show the boy that he wasn’t thinking of attacking him. “I always liked you, you know that. Tell me what it was you didn’t like about me.”

As he spoke, he walked towards Crest. The muzzle of the pistol followed him. Sid showed no emotion whatsoever, merely standing there, frozen to the spot.

Throw the pistol away! Please! It was in vain. Sid did not react to Monterny’s attempts to influence him.

With one last quick step, Monterny managed to get behind the

Arkonide. He switched on his suit's protective shield to protect Crest and himself. The typical shimmering became visible...and then died away immediately.

Monterny tried the switch a second time. The outcome was the same. Was it broken? Or was Thora behind it? Could she influence the battledress from the ship? But if that was the case, she could have quickly ended the chase to the empty warehouse in Washington. So why hadn't she? No, the only explanation was that the suit was defective.

Sid stared at him furiously. He was now holding the pistol with both hands so that he could aim better. But it was obvious that he was scared he might hit Crest by mistake.

"If you really intend to shoot, go ahead!" Monterny said. He stiffened. Sid would not shoot. He knew that. "You want to show what you're capable of. What are you waiting for? If you hate me so much, go on and kill me!"

Sid closed his left eye and looked down the barrel of the pistol with his right.

19.

Stranded in Fort Sunrise

Silence.

Monterny had the distinct impression that the world was holding its breath. Even time seemed to stand still.

Sid aimed for a long time and with precision. The boy was no longer shaking and had now taken on an ice-cold air.

He isn't a child soldier! He can't look someone in the eye and kill them, Monterny thought to himself. "Let go of the weapon, son! Please!" he tried again. But his attempt was as unsuccessful as before. The boy was withstanding his suggestive powers.

Something that sounded like sizzling and crackling could be heard from up high. Monterny lifted his eyes without losing sight of Sid.

Thora's sphereship was engulfed in a blaze. Ivan Goratschin! He had woken from his coma!

That was Goratschin's doing: tiny nuclear explosions. As a firestarter, Ivan had the same devastating power his brother Ivanovich had possessed. He allowed carbon and calcium atoms to react with one another, and the spectrum of his abilities ranged from a tiny flame to heavy explosions.

Ivan's mind, which had just emerged from a coma, was raging with unimaginable power all around the spaceship. The noise was deafening. The protective shield broke down completely only seconds later. All that remained was a flickering energy haze and the thunderous explosions that jumped over to the ship's hull. The steel appeared to glow for a second, and then it was over.

The sphere wobbled. For a few moments, it seemed like it would climb and fly away. But it sagged. Several spacedrives in the equatorial ring caught fire, their weak thrust no longer enough to stabilize the craft.

It fell like a stone, caught itself after a few hundred meters, and then fell farther.

Everybody stared at the sky aghast. Monterny no longer believed that Thora would manage to stabilize the ship. Goratschin had not only broken open the protective shield, his powers had obviously caused grave damage.

Tako Kakuta was back. He had returned after informing Tatiana of the plan and had tried to look after Deegan. The shock was written on his face. He held the dead telekinetic under his arms, but he did not teleport away with him.

"Tako!" Monterny called out. "You can't help Roster anymore! The Arkonide killed him! Get the two of us out of here!"

The teleporter looked at him, shaking his head reluctantly. "I won't do it," he said quietly, taking a very short bow. "I'm needed more urgently elsewhere." He let Deegan's body drop to the ground again. "Goodbye, Clifford!"

Flabbergasted, Monterny looked at the spot where the Japanese man had just been standing. Tako Kakuta had vanished—and he certainly didn't materialize next to Monterny in order to bring him to safety. He was simply gone.

A shadow flitted across the runway. The sphereship was gaining height again. The hissing of the drives raged like a firestorm. Then everything went silent again, and the sphere crashed to the ground.

In that very same second, Monterny raised his raygun. He didn't care whether Sid's bullet killed Crest or not; he was determined to get rid of the boy.

A shape jumped at him, the product of a mutated mind. It was not real, but it dug its claws into Monterny's flesh like a hungry animal. He thought he could hear a primeval roar, the momentum of the mental beast almost knocking him off his feet.

At the same time, the sphereship dug itself deep into the ground. The sound of pounding and banging could be heard from underground, and the ground was shaking.

The beast of prey rolled over Monterny, roaring as it went. It screamed as its powerful fangs snapped at him. It was not made of matter and had emerged from nowhere, yet he could feel its fangs tearing deep into his flesh. They changed him, making his cells explode with rampant growth and ripping open his veins.

The beast let go of him a few seconds later. It sized him up and bared its fangs again but then withdrew, snuggling up to the girl who accompanied Sid, whimpering and timid. Right after that, it

disappeared into thin air.

Monterny acknowledged the girl's special powers with the rest of his waning consciousness. This child held life in her hands, and she could heal or kill as she wished.

His heart was gripped by a cramp, and then it stopped beating altogether.

Rico was dead!

Rhodan had covered the camera's view, but Thora still saw the embers flow out of the body of her companion. Rico...not an Arkonide, but a robot. It explained a great deal but also gave rise to new questions.

Thora felt a great sense of anger. Even a little disappointment. Rico had believed in the natives of the third planet, and now they had killed him.

She activated the main controls, getting ready to fire. She released all weapons. The only thing that prevented her from activating them was Crest. But seconds later, it was too late. A wall of flame could be seen on the screens. An alarm wailed throughout the ship, the protective field load fast approaching a critical level.

She had been attacked by an unknown weapon.

Thora called up the rangefinder displays. Neither interceptors of the natives nor an unknown spaceship was close to the *Tosoma IX*. Nevertheless, the protective shield had reached its limit, hitting the warning mark and then exceeding it.

The alarm was piercing. A moment later, the protective shield collapsed. Dozens of alerts came from the outer shell; it looked like it was being hit by heavy lasers. All the rescue systems had broken down completely. The locks closed shut. The ship started to fall downwards, and was then stabilized by the automatic systems.

Still more displays malfunctioned. Only a few of the spacedrives on the equatorial ring showed themselves to be on standby. The anti-grav broke down, then stabilized again.

The spacedrives fired over and over—a failed attempt by the automatic systems to compensate for the ship's tilted position. Thora felt a light waft of air, and then a barbarian was standing in front of her. A slender man. She noticed his black hair and high cheekbones.

The man smiled. He stretched his hand out to Thora and took her arm without asking. As she moved to push his hand away, she

was suddenly standing next to the river she had seen on her screens only seconds before.

The man removed his hand from her arm. “My name is Tako Kakuta,” he said. “You are Thora, are you not? I have heard a great deal about you.”

She asked herself why he had rescued her, and more than anything else, how. But ultimately, the answer was of secondary importance. She saw the *Tosoma IX* crash to the ground close to the river. The craft dug deep into the overgrown soil, pushing a mound of dirt and mud before it, until it finally came to a halt, embedded deep in the ground. Tremors, accompanied by dull rumbling, ran through the soil below their feet. It sounded as if the ground wanted to open up and swallow everything.

Thora looked over to the ship, only just beginning to realize what the breakdown of the rescue systems meant: she would probably not have survived the crash.

Without the ship, she was stranded on Earth. She and Crest would not get away from this planet.

Thora started walking. She wanted to go to the ship, but she stopped after only a few steps and turned around. The human who had saved her life was standing there alone. He had his arms folded in front of his body and was watching her go. She could recognize no emotion in his face.

“Thank you!” she said. It wasn’t easy for her.

When he showed no reaction, she went over to him and stretched out her hand in the way she had already observed many times on this planet. Tako Kakuta took her hand.

“I did it gladly, Thora,” he replied. “Now I know where I belong.”

Epilogue

July 16, 2036,
Terrania

They were back in the desert. A few weeks ago, none of them had expected to see buildings in the area close to the Juyan salt lake, which were now shooting up fast out of the desert soil. The robots worked tirelessly.

Perry Rhodan, Reginald Bull, Crest, and Thora had managed to flee from Fort Sunrise thanks to the teleporter Tako Kakuta. The crashed sphereship, the explosion of the *Phoenix*, which Bull had arranged for with a heavy heart by remote control, had caused enough of a diversion. A private airplane provided by Homer G. Adams was waiting for them at a nearby airfield.

Rhodan looked at the people gathered around him. It was a small group, but they had shown that they held together. Bull was there, as was Adams, who had built up a financial empire from very humble beginnings, and who was looking for kindred spirits.

The Terranian Union had started small. It was an idea... Actually, a dream of all humanity that had never been realized. The opportunity had finally arisen, and a start had been made.

Somebody had gotten hold of a bottle of champagne. Bull went around, filling the glasses of those present.

Ras Tschubai, the man from South Sudan, was just as much a part of the founding group as the teleporter Tako Kakuta, who was a legacy of the Fukushima catastrophe. Back then, after the huge earthquake and the tsunami in Japan, the world had already changed. And now an even bigger upheaval was coming.

Lesly Pounder was with them via Net transmission. He also spoke for Allan Mercant, who could not be reached. The former agent was busy smuggling Eric Manoli and Frank Haggard out of the country. The two doctors had managed to escape during the chaos that Thora's appearance had triggered. Mercant's people, who seemed to be everywhere, had managed to get a hold of them and

hide them from the authorities.

John Marshall was there as well, standing with Sid González and Sue.

“General Bai Jun has been informed,” Rhodan announced. “He expressed how glad he is, but he unfortunately cannot be here in person.”

Bull raised his eyebrows but did not comment. Thora and Crest were also missing. The old Arkonide was still very weak, and the doctors had ordered strict bed rest. Thora had decided to stay by his side and watch out for him.

“Deeds are always preceded by great ideas.” Rhodan gestured towards the group. “The time is more than ripe for the best of these ideas: a united humanity. An Earth without borders and without national disputes. A world in which neither skin color nor religious creed decide who lives with whom, where all that matters is humanity—the world of the Terranians.”

Perry Rhodan lifted his glass.

“To Terra and a wonderful future!”

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By Arndt Ellmer (Episode 7) and Hubert Haensel (Episode 8)
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